

庵田定夏

Sadanatsu Anda

KOKORO CONNECT NISE RANDOM

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NanoDesu Translations

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Color Illustrations





—It doesn't matter if you don't break up with Inaban, just go out with me.

"Let's break up."

"You're so annoying, you talk too much.
Honestly, I'm fed up with you."

I'm telling you
to pursue both
relationships
at the same time.

"... You want me
to... ignore... Yui?"

—It
doesn't
matter
if I'm not
in **first**
place.

This world
really is quite
fascinating,
isn't it?

That would be so-called happiness, that would be the correct path.

Taichi
and
Inaban

squish!



****“It doesn’t matter if you don’t break up with Inaban, just go out with me.”****

After new members Chihiro and Shino join, Taichi and the other members of the Cultural Research Club prepare for the upcoming athletics festival in high spirits, but the two first years don’t seem too interested in this grand event.

One day, Iori suddenly tells Taichi: “I can’t forget you”; everyone around seems to be talking and behaving with quite a peculiar air --- since they trust each other, the five would never suspect each other’s words, but mocking them behind their backs is someone whom Taichi and the others would never expect...

The fifth, bond-crossed episode of this pentagonal romantic comedy of love and youth has begun!

Prologue

Month: O

Day: X

Overcast

--- I met it.

No, no, that didn't happen, what am I writing? That didn't count.

I didn't meet anyone, I didn't see anyone, I didn't hear anyone, I don't know, I don't know, that didn't happen!

Since that was just a joke, I definitely dreamt that up. Yeah, I was dreaming, that's gotta be it.

How could something like that exist in real life?! So my world definitely didn't change, absolutely not.

Yep, today is normal like always, tomorrow will be normal like always, the day after tomorrow will be normal like always, and the day after the day after tomorrow will be normal like always, everything will be normal like always.

Ugh, everything always being so normal is kind of annoying.

It's annoying, but that's another matter.

I'll go to bed early today then, I'm tired already. These strange things are happening because I'm tired. I'll see about it tomorrow, tomorrow will be a good day.

That way, everything will be back to normal.

I'll forget it.

Goodnight.

Someone like myself...

Chapter 1: The Athletics Festival

“We will now begin discussing the athletics festival.”

During the first half of June, in the classroom of Class 2-B in Yamaboshi High School, class representative Setouchi Kaoru spoke those words.

The class meeting in sixth period today, a Monday, was being used to discuss the athletics festival to be held in early July.

“Boys, gather around the male athletics leader, Watase-kun; girls, gather around the female athletic leader, Kurihara.”

Setouchi ordered neatly; she had gotten completely used to the class rep’s duties. Under her short black hair, a pair of shiny, very noticeable earrings displayed themselves on her earlobes; she gave a strong impression of a well-dressed honor student.

The students in the class chattered to one another as they stood up, and Yaegashi Taichi began to move as well.

“It’s athletics festival season again! It really makes you excited~, right Yaegashi-kun?” trilled a grinning Nakayama Mariko, who tied her hair into cute pigtails, as they walked. Nakayama was a cheerful girl who always smiled.

“Yeah.” Taichi nodded and replied.

“Hey, tsk-tsk, that was too short of a reply, Yaegashi-kun! That’s just one word, one word!”

Although Nakayama’s pushy behavior made Taichi somewhat uncomfortable, she was on good terms with Nagase, and that caused her to often stick around Taichi.

“Ah, ahh, sorry.”

“Uu~, your response is so boring. You’re not like this when you’re using that tone of voice and whispering words of love to Inaba-san all the time~.”

Just then, a shadow suddenly lunged from behind Nakayama.

“Da-n! You guys are really chatting it up, Nakayama-chan and Taichi!”

The space around them was already sparkling with just Nakayama, and the latest addition made it scintillate. The person hugging Nakayama was the Cultural Research Club president, Nagase Iori, a pretty girl generally agreed to be the cutest in her grade. She was becoming more and more accustomed to letting her long hair down maturely, and her spirit and appearance complemented each other solidly.

“Yup~, because Yaegashi-kun and I have a very good relationship!”

“What? Well, there’s no way my relationship with Taichi will lose to yours! We’ve been through a lot together during club activities this past year!”

Been through a lot -- What Taichi, Nagase, and the other members of the Cultural Research Club had gone through this year could not be expressed through such a simple phrase.

But now, the fact that everyone could happily laugh like this was real; the fact that Taichi and Nagase could view each other as friends was also real.

As long as these are real, it should be all right to describe everything else with the phrase “been through a lot”.

Even if danger ever approached again, all would be well as long as Taichi and the others worked together, stood, and fought.

“What are you thinking about all by yourself? Taichi, there is a pair of pretty girls hugging you left and right! Or is it because you’ve got your lovely wife Inaban that you’re ignoring all the other girls?”

“A wife, hm? Well, you’re right, she’s Yaegashi-kun’s most doted and beloved wife!”

“Hey! I think I just heard someone say ‘I really want to be hugged by pretty girls, and bask in a whirlpool of cuteness’! I want to bask in it too!”

“No one said that, okay?”

The person sprinting over just to make this strange declaration was Kiriya Yui, another member of the Cultural Research Club with Taichi. Kiriya had a

petite frame, silky chestnut-colored hair, a self-declared cute-loving personality, and was a standard modern girl, but she was also a beast in the world of Women's Full Contact Karate, with a fighting side to her.

“That's weird, did I hear wrong? What a pity, I thought I had finally found a partner with whom I could freely talk about my dreams...”

“Geez, I really worry about Kiriyama sometimes.”

Taichi muttered. Although Kiriyama's personality was relatively serious, she would turn weird whenever anything “cute” was mentioned.

Taichi concluded his blithe chitchat with the girls and walked toward the desk of the male athletics leader --- Watase, a cool and relaxed sportsman in the soccer club.

“Geez, you can't meet here without stopping by the girls first, can you?”

After Watase said this, the other boys all piped up with objections and negotiations like: “Enough is enough!” “Trade places with me! How much do you want?!”

“I want to confirm something first.”



Not long after the discussion began, Kurihara Yukina, the other athletics leader in the center of the girls' group, raised her hand to speak; she seemed to want the boys to notice as well.

Kurihara was a tall, slender girl who was Kiriya's best friend. Her vibrantly dyed curls and mature makeup made her seem like a fun-loving girl at a glance, but she was a diligent student in the track and field club, and never failed to attend practice.

“Does everyone really want to win?”

“Of course!”

At first a few people shouted, then the entire class yelled together, “We really want to win!”.

“Besides, if we win the athletics festival, it'll benefit us during the cultural festival~,” Nakayama said in a piercing voice.

Yamaboshi High School's athletics festival was a battle during which one class from each of the three grades was selected, then combined into a team. The team that won would also earn the privilege of organizing activities, being able to freely organize whatever activities and choose whatever location it desired during the upcoming cultural festival.

“If we win the athletics festival, the Cultural Festival will be a lot more fun!”

“To stir things up in the class, we've got to win!”

“Even if we ignore all that, what's the point of a competition if you don't try to win!”

“OK, OK. I get how everyone feels.”

Kurihara quieted the group down. Noticing the situation, a surprised-looking Kiriya murmured to Kurihara:

“By the way, Yukina, since you're the athletics leader this shady attitude of yours won't do; you must take up the role of a good leader.”

“You don't even need to mention it. Besides, I'm doing this for your own good.”

“For my own good? Doing what?”

Kiriyama tilted her head in confusion. Kurihara ignored her and continued nonchalantly:

“So, it’s been decided that in all of the girls’ events we’ll be using the ‘Martial Goddess’, Kiriyama Yui.”

“Wait a second! Don’t just make decisions like that! And what do you mean, ‘Martial Goddess’?!”

Everyone glanced at Kiriyama and nodded in unison.

“And there’s a limit to events that one person can sign up for, so this is a ridiculous plan, isn’t it?!”

“Not a problem. We will use Masked Kiriyama One and Masked Kiriyama Two.”

“If you need them, I can lend you guys some masks from my collection. Like the one from that San Diego lightweight who actually won the world championship---”

“Of course I think there’s a problem! I’m not doing it! And Taichi, can you not collect masks like it’s normal and lecture everyone about it? It makes you unapproachable!”

Kiriyama’s merciless. I wanted to talk more about that, damn!

“Are we temporarily halting Operation Masked Kiriyama?”

“Please freeze that operation forever!”

After Kiriyama and Kurihara’s comical dialogue^[1] came to an end, everyone divided themselves back into separate genders and began discussing again.

“Hmm, for the boys... the girls seem to be having the same idea; in any case, the Sports Club guys will be coming out in full force, hopefully in high-scoring events, then, as for guys like Yaegashi who aren’t in the Sports Club but aren’t in bad shape, you all will attend some lesser events and we’ll leave the rest to everyone else. How’s that?” Watase suggested, and everyone nodded in assent, with the most vigorous ones coming from the Sports Club members.

“Then it’s decided!”

“I’ll do relays!”

“I’ll do botaoshi.”^[2]

Taichi agreed, too: “Put me in whatever competition you need me for.”

“Uh... Do you guys have any objections?”

Watase confirmed with the boys who weren’t accustomed to exercise.

“Ah, yeah.”

“Yup.”

“No problem.”

“Great, then let’s start with the super-high-scoring staple of Yamaboshi High -
-- the mixed cavalry fight.”^[3]

After the events were distributed, everyone returned to their seats and Setouchi again stood at the front of the classroom.

“Now, we’ll end by selecting representatives for the cheer competition.”

Yamaboshi High School’s cheer competition could be called the central event of the athletics festival. It wasn’t just a simple performance; it was also an important way of earning points. A vast amount of effort was poured into this event every year, with practices starting a month before the athletics festival even began. During practice, each grade would select a number of boys and girls as representatives, in charge of the entire group’s practice.

“--- and Yaegashi. That’s three guys. As for girls, Kiriya, Nagase... and another spot, do we have any volunteers?”

The boys were picked very quickly, but the girls still lacked one more.

“How about you?”

“Um, I’m not good at leading and all of that...”

“Nakayama-chan?”

“Nuu~n... I’m not much of an athlete...”

“It would be better for me to do it, but the cheer rep can’t be the class president or sports rep...” Kurihara murmured.

Setouchi hugged her chest, muttering worriedly, “What do we do...?”

Just before they could select the final girl, the bell rang.

Almost at the same time, Class 2-B’s homeroom teacher --- Gotou Ryuuzen, the one who had pushed all responsibility onto the class representative and taken a nap, finally awoke.

“Uhm? Ohh, it’s this late already. The discussion’s finished, right, Setouchi? Then let’s---”

“No, it’s not.”

“Ehhhhhhh!? Can’t we go home already?”

“What are you surprised about?! Please help us, too! We still need a girl as a cheer competition rep, we’re currently discussing who she should be!”

Gotou, who had been Taichi’s homeroom teacher since first year and was also the advisor for the Cultural Research Club, was a shockingly indolent teacher. His amount of duty-shirking was quickly approaching a problematic level.

“Hmm, I see... So Nagase and Kiriya have been selected already... Hmm? I feel like there’s someone missing... Ah! Fujishima! Only Fujishima can do it!”

“... Huh? Me?”

Fujishima Maiko, once class president of Class 1-B but now demoted to a common student in Class 2-B, looked surprised.

“This kind of job... There should be others more capable than I am...”

Her once-dazzling leader figure was now a thing of the past; Fujishima, who had been central to class meetings in her first year, stayed more in the back and kept silent nowadays.

No one was exactly sure what to say to that, and the air stagnated. Then, Nagase broke the silence.

“I-I also agree! If it’s okay, I hope Fujishima-san can work together with us. As long as Fujishima-san is willing to give it all she’s got, victory will be right before

us! And besides, we have so many Sports Club members in our class!”

“I-I agree as well. We can do it with Fujishima-san! Or rather, there’s no one better than Fujishima-san!” Watase seconded the motion.

Following his example, the students began to say, one after another:
“...Victory.” “It does look very promising!” “Let’s shoot for victory!” “Yes!”
“Uwooo!”

Class 2-B was already fired up with high morale for the athletics festival, but the class grew even more passionate when the word “victory” was set as their target. The fervor of the class slowly flowed into Fujishima’s heart.

“Uh... Um... Then... I’ll do it.”

The instant Fujishima nodded her head, the class broke into deafening applause.

If she really didn’t want to do it, then what would we do... Taichi thought, but upon seeing Fujishima’s slightly embarrassed expression, worrying seemed unnecessary.

“Whew... I think you all should understand that I didn’t suggest Fujishima, who was class president in first year and would appropriately take care of everything in my place, as the cheer rep just because I wanted to go home early. I was providing an opportunity for her, who lacks self-confidence, to pull herself together. As a teacher, after careful deliberation, I---”

“Please shut your mouth, because there are people who need to rush to their clubs.”

“Yes, I’ll shut my mouth. I’m sorry, Setouchi-san.”

Setouchi was once a bit of a delinquent girl; her stare pierced one to the bone.

“Then it’s decided --- Good work, everyone!”

Setouchi concluded, and the class meeting was dismissed.

At the same time, as though she had realized something important, Fujishima widened her eyes.

“Ah! Come to think of it, was I just... invited by Nagase-san to do something? In other words... Nagase-san has finally accepted my love! Yahoo!”

Fujishima was instantly high-spirited.

“.... Huh? What kind of super-explanation is that? Th-that’s not what I meant, Fujishima-san! Wait, c-can you please not look at me like that while licking your lips?”



“You’re joking! Shino-chan and Chihhi’s class are going to be on the same team as Inaban’s class?”

Nagase yelled in surprise. She was sitting on a folding chair beside Taichi.

After school, the chairs in Room 401 on the fourth floor of the club building were occupied by five second year students, including Taichi, and two first year students --- members of the Cultural Research Club --- making a total of seven people.

“Apparently.”

“That’s cold! Can’t you have a more exciting reaction? ‘Ohhhhh, really?’ or something like that? You’re too cold!”

“But in terms of probability, this situation isn’t impossible, is it?”

Uwa Chihiro responded flatly to Nagase’s excitement. He sported an uneven, relaxed hairstyle, and was a properly defined, cool-tempered guy. Although he appeared to be neutral, he attended the same karate dojo as Kiriya, and trained his body like a manly man. By way of Kiriya’s introduction, he developed an interest in the Cultural Research Club and, after a series of various twists and turns, he joined the Cultural Research Club as a first year new club member.

“Chihhi is no fun, right, Shino-chan?”

“Yup, Chihiro-kun is quite boring all right. But, something like ‘needing to say

something interesting to fit the atmosphere, instead coldly giving a bored response to deliberately create an awkward silence' could possibly be Chihiro-kun's own unique way of joking around. It's still quite boring, though."

"What's the matter with you? Shino-chan! How come you're so vicious?"

"Huh? Ah? Did I mess it up? People have been telling me, 'You're too honest' or 'You say surprisingly harsh stuff', so I wanted to say some things to Chihiro-kun too..."

"Yeah, I now clearly understand that Shino-chan's a genius at insulting people."

The girl speaking slightly illogically with Nagase was Enjouji Shino, who, like Chihiro, was a new member of the Cultural Research Club. She was like a small animal; whether it was her appearance or her movements, one would liken this girl to a miniature dachshund, and her fluffy bob haircut was extremely adorable. Enjouji would frequently be in a helter-skelter state, but she was still capable of articulating herself resolutely and decisively.

Although Taichi had started off perplexed by their new companions, in the full month that had passed since their joining, he had already become quite familiar with them. The two new members probably felt the same way.

"But it's getting really exciting now!" Aoki exclaimed cheerfully. His lightly-permed hair swayed gently along with his tall physique.

"If Inaba-chan, Chihiro, Shino-chan, and I are the Green Team, while Taichi, Yui, and Iori-chan are the Red Team, and we can make it a team battle, that'll be a lot more fun than just the normal athletics festival!"

"But there are a ton of other teams too, and all three grades are attending, so we really can't do it by ourselves." Taichi murmured. In response, Nagase suddenly began to emit Uun noises while sizing up Taichi and Chihiro.

"What?" asked Taichi.

"Nah, I'm just wondering... Taichi and Chihhi are different types, but their calm and quiet personalities.... Their character traits seem to be overlapping?"

"Th-They're not overlapping!"

Taichi felt that his own individuality was in great danger.

“There’s nothing of the sort... Right, Kiriya?”

Taichi threw the subject of conversation at Kiriya, who was sitting across from him.

“Uh, um... Ta-Taichi has his own strengths, and Chihiro-kun has his own strengths... Right?”

“Don’t look away! That kind of attitude tells me you want to say something good but can’t, it hurts a lot!”

“Are we really that similar? At least I’m not a natural-born gigolo.”

“Are you saying that I’m a natural-born gigolo? I’m not!”

“Nice burn, Taichi, that’s the stuff. As long as you keep up this kind of intense roasting, you’ll be able to guarantee your own unique traits~!”

“Does this mean that as long as I become emotional, other people will think I’m paying attention to our overlapping character traits and want to use that to differentiate myself?”

Whenever he thought of how others saw him, Taichi would lose willpower; if he didn’t do that, they’d think that their character traits were overlapping... He was between a rock and a hard place.

“That’s it Taichi and Chihiro, you guys should get hyped, yeah!” Aoki shouted to join the fun as Kiriya heaved a sigh from beside him.

“Ah, at least these two aren’t like Aoki. Just one is enough, but add in another one and that’d be unbearable. Right, Shino-chan?”

“Yup, Aoki-senpai really is very annoying.”

“Shino-chan, you don’t have any intention of saying anything good about me at all! You at least showed signs of wanting to help Chihiro when we were talking about him, didn’t you?”

“Say, Inaba, Taichi’s been accused of not being special at all, why aren’t you reacting?” Nagase extended the conversation towards Inaba Himeko. Since a while ago, Inaba’s face had been melancholy, and she was brooding quietly by

herself.

Concealed behind her jet black, silky hair, Inaba's dour expression was heart-poundingly charming. Compared to her fellow classmates, it was better to say that the slightly mature Inaba was more beautiful than cute. This Inaba was Taichi's cherished girlfriend.

"Ahh, I don't care, I don't care what anyone else thinks; to me, Taichi is my only one. No matter how much a number 1 is loved by everyone else, compared to my only one, they mean nothing at all."

As her boyfriend, Taichi felt a little strange to be evaluated like that but, judging by those around him, Inaba was probably slightly lovesick. Nagase called this "Dereban syndrome".

"Inaban's situation is no longer a matter of character uniqueness; she's become a completely different person! Love conquers all! Nah, in this kind of situation, shouldn't Taichi conquer all?"

"N-No way, really? Hahaha."

Taichi became embarrassed, so Chihiro said to Nagase: "Nagase-senpai, please take back what you said. I don't think I'm as dumb as Taichi-senpai."

"Wha... Did you just call me dumb? What a dumb thing to say!"

Don't look at Taichi now; his grades actually ranked among the best.

"There aren't any other special reasons, but I think what Taichi-senpai just said was pretty dumb."

"Your words are ruthless, Enjouji!"

But her carefree air only made one realize that she was just being a bit more candid, so you wouldn't feel angry at all; what an inconceivable character.

Now, it was Taichi's turn to talk to Inaba:

"Hey, I've noticed it too, you don't seem to be very spirited. Is something wrong?"

"Because... Uh...."

Inaba stammered and stared awkwardly at the floor, avoiding Taichi's eyes.

“Tell me if there’s something. If you can’t say it aloud now, you can let me know anytime.”

“...Thanks, Taichi.”

Inaba smiled gently and nodded. Even if she kept silent, it could be felt that she had the utmost trust in Taichi.

“Itchy... Itchy... My back’s really itchy!”

Nagase massaged her entire body, twisting around in agony.

Finally, Inaba, originally too embarrassed to speak, finally said:

“Then I’ll say it... I was thinking, during the athletics festival, Taichi and I will become opponents.”

“Is that a problem?”

“‘Is that a problem’?! Taichi... Can you handle being at odds with me?”

“Um, but it’s the athletics festival.”

“Can the relationship between Taichi and me be passed over just with ‘Um, but it’s the athletics festival’?”

It made Taichi very happy that Inaba valued their relationship so highly, but since she was a natural worrywart, it was a little high-maintenance at times. But she was really cute this way too!

“Taichi-kun, don’t smile wickedly like that, think of something to help Inaba.” Nagase piped up.

“Hey, I wasn’t smiling very wickedly.”

“So you were smiling very pervertedly?”

“I wasn’t smiling pervertedly either! We’re very pure!”

“You sure crack me up~.”

Dodging Nagase’s teases, Taichi told Inaba: “You can go out all during the athletics festival, it’s okay.”

“Is it okay?... Even if I break out the big guns? If I were to break out the big guns... one or two main force members of the the opposing class might turn up

absent for blank blank reasons.”

“It’s a mere high school athletics festival, what kind of stunt are you trying to pull?! Compete properly, okay!”

What did she mean by blank blank, anyway?

“G-Got it, I’ll promise you... Then, I’ll break out the big guns! Basically, I really hate losing! I’ll annihilate all of my enemies! It’s first prize or nothing!”

“Huh? Weren’t you just saying that only your only one means anything?”

Taichi cocked his head confusedly. It seemed Inaba’s personality was split into “Normal Inaba” and “Dereban”.

“Inaba-chan’s declaration of victory! It looks like victory is already within my grasp!”

Aoki shouted, seemingly igniting Nagase’s competitiveness as well, and she took up the challenge: “Don’t get cocky, Aoki! Don’t forget that our class still has the ‘Martial Goddess’, Kiriya Yui!”

“Right! As long as I’m there for that day... Hey, lori, don’t call me a ‘Martial Goddess’ or whatever, that name’s not cute at all.”

“Y-Yui-senpai is very cute!”

“Ahh~, thank you~ Shino-chan! I can’t fight against Shino-chan’s Green Team now~”

“Heh heh heh, just leave it to Shino, and in the blink of an eye this little girl loses all fighting ability!”

“Inaba, can you not sit there and voice act for Enjouji?”

Taichi roasted. Everyone was really in high spirits.

Nagase, ever indomitable, spoke again: “Chihhi, you should also go tell Yui ‘You’re really really cute’! With your handsome face, you’ll be able to sink Yui no problem, since she belongs to the good-looks club!”

“I don’t belong to the good~ looks~ club~! Don’t~ make~ things~ up!”

“By the way Nagase, why are you teasing Yui? Aren’t we on a team together?”

“Ah! Whoops!”

Originally dumbstruck, Chihiro seemed to be infected by the recklessly heckling atmosphere from everyone around him, and finally said in passing:

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll say it, okay... You’re very cute, Yui-senpai.”

“Huh? Wait, Chihiro-kun! It sounded like you were really serious just now? S-Stop messing around~ My face is so hot! Stop it~, Chihiro-kun is very handsome too~! Yaa!”

Seeing Kiriya squirm around in embarrassment, Aoki spoke as though there was no time to lose:

“Yui! You’re the cutest today, too!”

“Ah, yeah, I know.”

“Why is there such a different reaction?!”

“Because it happens a lot, so when you tell me I’m cute, I don’t feel anything at all.”

Hearing Kiriya say that, Chihiro glanced at her from the corner of his eye, then muttered with a sigh: “... It’s just an athletics festival...”

At this, Aoki responded: “You lack motivation Chihiro! Aren’t you the cheer contest rep for your class?”

“Didn’t I say it before, that it’s only because I lost a match of jankenpon...^[4] Ahh, my luck doesn’t seem too good... Eh, Taichi-senpai?”

“I see, Chihiro. I’m actually bad at jankenpon too, looks like we’re similar after all.”

“Please don’t resonate with me in weird places, and could you not put your hand on my shoulder?”

Chihiro was a cold guy.

“No matter what, you should pull yourself together, Chihiro! We’re in this together... Ah, right, to make everybody compete more seriously, how about we make a Cultural Research Club bet?”

Following Aoki’s suggestion, Nagase seconded the motion: “Not bad, and it’s

three against four! Well, the team ahead in the line... can order the losing team to do whatever they want! They can make anyone on the team do it, but they can only give one order!”

“No problem!” Kiri-yama replied immediately.

“I-Is the order absolute, Iori-senpai...?” Enjouji asked fearfully, a worried look floating onto her face.

“Absolutely!”

“R-Really.... Then if I lose... I’ll be sold to a faraway foreign country... Never coming back to Japan again...”

“Don’t you think you’re overthinking it, Enjouji?” Taichi teased.

What would they do if an order of great concern was given based on victory or defeat in the athletics festival? Enjouji’s negative thoughts really were a bit beyond reasonable limits.

Aoki said to Shino: “Shino-chan! You just need to win! If you win, you can order your opponents, Taichi, Iori, and Yui to do whatever you want!”

“Huh....? Th-Then, I can ask Taichi-senpai to murmur *this* or *that* into my ear.... Yeaahh! I’m starting to feel the heat!”

“Hey, Enjouji, your character ruined itself way too early, didn’t it?”

However, they still had not known each other for a long time, and Enjouji should not have expressed all of herself yet. In any case, her dedication to voices (especially Taichi’s voice) was sometimes quite astonishing.

Enjouji’s passion seemed to mysteriously infect Inaba as well.

“Then I finally... finally... finally can go with Taichi to that place... and we’ll... Yaah! The rest is too embarrassing, I can’t say it!”

Her smile was extremely bashful.

“Inaba is actually quite lewd, looks like the day to start calling her ‘Pervert-ban’ isn’t far on the horizon.”

“Hey, Nagase, don’t call my girlfriend weird names like that, okay?”

Just like that, they did nothing special today either, and the time slipped by.

But times like these made one feel quite comfortable.

During their discussion, Chihiro temporarily fell silent, looking a bit out of it. Taichi was slightly worried as to whether Chihiro disliked this or not, so he confirmed his expression, only to see Chihiro trying desperately to hold back his laughter, looking very happy as well.

The instant Taichi exhaled, Chihiro, with his head slightly bowed, lifted the corners of his mouth.

And grinned.

Translator's Notes:

[1] The original word is manzai, which is a traditional style of stand-up comedy in Japanese culture. It usually involves two performers, or manzaishi: a straight man, or tsukkomi, and a funny man, or boke, trading jokes between each other very quickly. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manzai>

[2] “Pole-toppling”, capture-the-flag like, constitutes two teams trying to topple the poles on the other team’s side of the field. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botaoshi>

[3] “Cavalry fight”, commonly played during school sports day events. It is a field event. A team of four competitors work together, with three carrying the fourth who wears a bandana (hachimaki). The team is defeated if they are knocked over or if the bandana is removed by an opponent. More info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_fight

[4] Jankenpon is essentially “rock-paper-scissors”. Chihiro means that he participated in a game of Jankenpon to determine the cheering rep (the loser would do it) and he lost.

Chapter 2: The Girl's Temptation

Month: O

Date: X

Clear

The athletics festival is a little depressing, because I know that I'll only become a burden to everyone.

We discussed the athletics festival today in class.

I don't know whether to call it a stroke of luck or misfortune: our class hardly had anyone motivated at all.

I was relieved, and my chest stabbed a little.

I hate myself for being relieved at that, what an utter disaster.

During the dull, cold discussion, when they were choosing someone for the troublesome duty of cheer competition rep, although it wasn't overly blatant, everyone was clearly dodging out of the way; it was so painful to watch...

I wanted to raise my hand and volunteer, but in that kind of atmosphere there was no way I'd have the courage to do that.

It's way too difficult to raise your hand in that kind of atmosphere... I don't think it could've been helped, anyway.

So I waited for someone else to raise their hand. I surveyed everyone expectantly, waiting for someone other than myself to raise their hand, but no one did.

Yet the upperclassmen on our team seemed different from us: they were full of energy and motivation. It looks like I'll only be holding everyone back, and I'm really sorry, but there's no way I can carry the whole class.

If it were possible... but I couldn't actually do it, will the end result be the same?

... Next time.

Next time... When I think I'm able to do it.

+++

Today, Yaegashi Taichi came again with everyone else to the club, where everyone horsed around and did their own thing too.

“All right, let's call it a day then!”

Club President Nagase Iori said in a clear voice.

Today, Inaba Himeko had other plans, so the other six members gathered at the club and held a brief meeting about the <Cultural Research News>. After the club was dismissed, everyone started their journey home.

On the way home, the people who had to head in different directions from everyone else gradually bid their farewells, and when the station nearest his home came into view, only Taichi was left.

Taichi walked out of the ticket stile and returned his ticket pass to his bag. Just then, a comfortable breeze blew by, and Taichi stretched slightly. A faintly sweet whiff of fragrance floated through the air on the wind; it seemed to be the aroma coming from the bakery in front of the station. He was a little hungry, but Taichi decided that he had to resist today. After all, the month had just begun, and spendthrift habits were strictly prohibited.

Taichi walked towards the parking lot.

The weather was beginning to grow hot and muggy, and in about a month, summer would arrive.

A high school couple walked in his direction, their fingers intertwined and pressed sweetly against each other. Taichi couldn't help but observe them, and his mind conjured an image of himself and Inaba. Ever since he had gotten a girlfriend, Taichi's perspective of couples on the street had changed: he could compare couples he saw to himself, and reference them as dating advice.

Now it was the girl's turn to hug the boy's arm tightly.

Inaba wanted to press closer to him, so should he let loose a bit and stop paying too much attention to other people's gazes? No, that would be too awkward, and wouldn't it upset some people? It was the same in the clubroom, especially when Nagase was present. Since there had been some complicated situations in the past, it was really quite difficult to ignore Nagase's gaze.

“—————”

He felt that, from far away, from as far away as the furthest boundaries, or rather, from as far away as the terminus of conscious thought, came a certain, extremely faint noise, reverberating in his mind.

It seemed to be an intangible, inconsequential, peculiar feeling, and before his brain could capture it, the noise vanished in the blink of an eye.

Taichi somehow felt a premonition, and turned his head to look behind him. Nagase Iori was standing there.

“Huh? Why are you here, Nagase?”

Taichi asked in a slightly stupid voice. Taichi and Nagase didn't live in the same town; the two of them had parted very early on, and he didn't hear anything about Nagase needing to come this way for something.

But the one thing he could be sure of was that Nagase was standing here.

“I need to... tell you something... can you talk right now?”

The girl, as beautiful as a natural antique, looked up at Taichi and asked.

“Um... but... can't we talk tomorrow?”

--- Did he just reject her?

Taichi didn't know why he rejected her. He didn't know the reason behind it, but before his brain could cogitate, his mouth had moved on its own. The reason being that he was having a very ominous premonition, and his instinct was screaming at him to get away from there.

“Are you busy with something?”

“Ah, no... I’m not busy with anything... Let’s talk now, then.”

What the hell was he saying? Nagase clearly had something to discuss, yet he was rejecting her without any reason whatsoever; this was extremely weird.

Taichi shifted his own thoughts.

She must have something important that she couldn’t tell him over the phone or by text message.

“... Let’s go find a family restaurant to sit down and talk.”

“No, no need, we’ll talk here.”

“Oh... I see.”

Nagase’s long hair swayed in the cool breeze that delivered the fragrance of summer; the air exuding from her slightly hanging curtain of night-colored hair very much suited her current, transparently melancholy expression, suiting it so much it was frightening.

Whether they were attracted by Nagase’s beauty or not, the passersby heading towards the station ticket stile occasionally turned their heads towards them.

Nagase’s fixated eyes captured Taichi’s frame; her eyes made Taichi’s heart began to clamor.

She opened her mouth:

“If I told you --- I can’t forget, what would you do?”

The surroundings were suddenly utterly engulfed in silence. In the space where no other sound was audible, there came an illusion that Taichi and Nagase were left alone, but that illusion suddenly faded, and the normal world returned.

“W-What do you mean... can’t forget? Who or what can’t you forget?”

Taichi’s voice was trembling. He clearly didn’t need to tremble, there was clearly no reason for him to start trembling.

“Just that Nagase Iori still can’t forget about Yaegashi Taichi.”

Why? Even now...

Nagase revealed a flirtatious, lonely smile, that looked like it was about to melt.

This was a decisive blow. It was much too sudden, much too sudden... No, but it wasn't too sudden at all, was it? Taichi could understand the connotation behind her words, but he didn't want to acknowledge it.

Didn't want to acknowledge it? Why? Because ---

He really didn't dare to believe it.

"What... in the world... are you saying?"

Taichi squeezed out his voice, clutching onto a wisp of hope.

"Ah... I still like Taichi, after all."

Reality is utterly cruel.

Even if the situation of "if things ended over there, then things ended" had happened, the story would still not conclude.

As though an artificially constructed perfect moment was withering and scattering, ruthless reality would still continue.

There was no perfect ending for suppressed love.



The next morning, Taichi went to school with a bizarre anxiety.

Because he had to catch Nagase, who had suddenly confessed to him yesterday, in the classroom.

After Nagase had conveyed to him that she "still couldn't forget about Yaegashi Taichi", she had left without waiting for an answer, as though it were a declaration of war.

Still can't forget; like --- Nagase meant that the feelings between both of them should have been consummately concluded without a hitch, but they hadn't

concluded after all?

The much-too-sudden declaration of war only brought confusion upon confusion for Taichi. With too many things on his mind, Taichi was completely unable to sort out his next course of action. The thing he minded the most, though, was how Nagase and Inaba viewed this situation.

Nagase Iori and Inaba Himeko.

Both of them had told him that they liked him, and he had liked both of them back. There was a firm bond between those two, incorruptible by anyone else, inaccessible even by Taichi.

Judging by what had happened before, Nagase should have told Inaba about this situation first --- in other words, the situation of her still concerning herself over Taichi and making such a declaration to him. But...

Taichi looked towards Nagase's seat; she had not arrived yet.

"Good morning hello~, Taichi!"

"Whooooa!"

Nagase suddenly greeted Taichi from behind.

"What's up, Taichi, what's with that weird noise?"

"Nothing... Um... M-Morning."

"Uh-huh, good morning. What're you being so sneaky for?"

"B-Because..."

It's all because you said that kind of stuff --- Taichi couldn't say that, and he didn't want to bring up that subject right now.

"Say, it's pretty hot today! I've already switched to the summer uniform, but I can't help but want to change into a cooler getup now!"

Having changed into a short-sleeved top and vest, Nagase sang "Should I take it off?! What to do?!", as she grabbed her vest and fanned herself.

Nagase Iori was, as usual, shining clearly and brightly as if completely normal.

As if she had forgotten what had happened yesterday.

But Taichi knew that Nagase couldn't have forgotten. If Nagase had the intention, she would take action according to her thoughts. Taichi knew that Nagase could do this.

"Hey, Iori! It's really hot today, good morning! Good morning to you too, Yaegashi-kun!"

Nakayama Mariko entered the scene, twintails swinging.

"Hey, Nakayama! It really is super hot today, I can't stand it! Morning!"

Nagase responded to Nakayama, seemingly cheerful and delighted.

"Hm? What's up, Yaegashi-kun? Are you ignoring me?"

"Ah, it's nothing. Morning, Nakayama."

"Hmm? You don't look too good today~, Yaegashi-kun. If you aren't up and at 'em, Yaegashi-kun, I can't get excited either... Shouldn't be that bad, though! Ah, Yui-chan. Good morning~."

"Ah, Yui's here, so, about yesterday~."

Nagase and Nakayama left Taichi in a storm of chattering.

Left alone, Taichi realized that his back was drenched in cold sweat.

Just then, as though Nagase and the others had passed the baton to him, Watase Shingo sidled up to Taichi.

"Yo~, Yaegashi. Hey, I've been thinking, girls seem to congregate very naturally near you, right? Since that's the case, as long as I stick to you and don't let go, the chances of me getting close to girls... to Fujishima-san would increase, wouldn't they? It's pretty simple for me to say hello or things like that to normal girls, but I've no such luck with Fujishima-san... Say, why the long face? If you keep looking sullen like that, your chances are gonna slip away, too."

Taichi hadn't the strength to retort.

What on earth was Nagase thinking?

What did Nagase want him to do?

How was he supposed to deal with that unconcluded bout of love?

After school that day, cheer competition reps from each year level were to gather together and begin practicing. During lunch break, Taichi, leading Class 2-B on his own, was assigned as the head for a pre-practice meeting (because he had lost at jankenpon).

Taichi finished his lunch very early and headed for the meeting point.

He seemed to hear a noiseless sound.

“Did you think about what I said yesterday? The part about me liking Taichi.”

So sudden again.

Taichi was seized by Nagase in the corridor of the north school building, and goosebumps erupted all over his body.

This school building was made up of special classrooms; even during lunch break, there was barely a soul in sight.

If this were normal, this would currently be the time Nagase was having lunch, so it couldn't be a coincidence for her to be here. Nagase had followed Taichi and looked for a place with no people before talking to him.

Nagase Iori, with her short-sleeved top and vest getup, proper features, impressive figure, and a perfect smile... smile? In this type of situation, for her to be wearing a smile was a little off, wasn't it?

“What do you mean, did I think about it... How do you expect me to answer that...”

“I'm being serious.”

Suddenly changing to a stern expression, Nagase took Taichi's heart captive. With nowhere to run, Taichi felt not the slightest bit of hope that he could flee.

Her charm, forged from her perfect, faultless beauty, was like coercion.

“What exactly have you seen, Taichi?”

What exactly had he seen?

He had once, for a time, misunderstood Nagase Iori as a person, so Taichi had become determined to absolutely observe Nagase closely this time. But was he being cocky?

The weather should have felt hot for the first half of June, and especially since today was muggy. It was clearly so hot, yet he felt quite cold.

“I want to become a little more stubborn.”

Nagase said, smiling a faint smile.

Inaba's face suddenly floated into Taichi's mind. He'd forgotten when, but he remembered that Inaba had once said something about Nagase wanting her to become a little more stubborn, so that Inaba could change herself.

What on earth would things become? Hadn't the triangle, although dangerous but still managing to balance itself, already stepped across danger and completely stabilized? Was it about to waver again? Had it never stopped wavering?

Was it really going to waver until it collapsed this time?

“Hey, hey, Nagase, what did you say to Inaba about this...”

“I didn't tell Inaba anything, because there's no need to.”

The need to do such a thing was, of course, between the parties themselves -- from that perspective it made sense, but weren't Nagase and Inaba an exception?

It was almost as though the frightening Nagase had returned... No, was it that that Nagase frequently stayed in Nagase's heart, and the only difference was whether it expressed itself or not?

“It'll be all right, as long as Taichi and I don't tell anyone, no one will ever find out. So just think about it, let's start all over from the beginning, not just as simple friends.”

Not just as simple friends, the meaning behind this was...

“... Did something happen?”

“No, it's just... I can't resist it anymore. I want to act boldly and pursue what I want.”

Resist? Had he and Inaba been compelling Nagase to resist all this time?

“Uh, but... that's impossible, isn't it?”

The love between himself and Nagase had once, for a time, reached an end. Yes, both of them should have completely accepted that ending. Furthermore, there was friendship between Nagase and Inaba, and besides, Taichi and Inaba were dating. So ---

“There is nothing in this world that is impossible or cannot be done.”

The crimson, flirtatious luster of Nagase’s lips as she murmured this seemed to be enticing Taichi.

After school, the Nagase who attended cheer competition practice was the Nagase Iori who was friendly to everyone, innocent and unaffected.



“Nagase, let’s sit down and talk this out properly.”

The next day, before he arrived at school, Taichi bumped into Nagase.

He was shocked for an instant, but he immediately pulled himself together and took the initiative by talking to her. Lately, when they had been alone together, Nagase kept giving off a weird vibe.

“Hm? You got something to tell me?”

Nagase asked with a clear, outgoing smile, devoid of any malice whatsoever. Was this her true face? Or was it a mask?

Extreme thoughts began permeating his mind.

“It’s about something you said to me, Nagase.”

Taichi thought that he couldn’t escape. Even if a thorny ending awaited him, he had to face it head on; he had to express his sincerity. Moreover, it was quite probable that Nagase became like this due to some sort of turning point, and troublesome things like before could possibly happen again.

“Something I said to you? Uh... Which thing?”

“Um, the thing you ran over and told me about yesterday, and the day before. That... thing.”

“Something important I told Taichi recently? Hmm...”

Nagase knit her brows together and sank into thought, seemingly truly unaware of what the thing was.

It really didn't look like theatrics, but this was Nagase Iori he was dealing with; it wasn't impossible for her.

“Sorry, I really don't know what it is. Have I been saying strange things lately?”

Nagase said, smiling.

It was a perfect smile, like that of an idol.

That smile was much too perfect, rendering one absolutely unable to see through her inner thoughts.

He could only find the correct answer without any hints; was she testing him?

If this was the case, then he'd take the initiative and strike first.

“It's about... you liking me.”

Nagase, who had been walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Taichi, halted her footsteps.

She froze to the spot, but immediately thawed.

“--- Who are you talking about?”

Her cold voice seemed to pierce right through him; Taichi couldn't help but feel fear.

“... You, Nagase.”

“Liking whom?”

“Liking me... Liking Yaegashi Taichi.”

“Judging by the atmosphere, this, ‘liking’. Doesn't refer to ‘liking’ as friends, does it?”

“Yeah... Of course not.”

The instant Taichi confirmed this, Nagase's smile froze.

She was clearly smiling, but she wasn't; she was clearly smiling, but it was without emotion.

Taichi had never seen a smile so horrifying.

"Hey, I usually really don't mind. No matter whether I'm chatting with Taichi, or whether Taichi's getting intimate with Inaba, or whatever; it's all the same."

It was clear but sounded monotonous; to some people, her voice might sound artificially synthesized.

Nagase took a step closer to Taichi.

"Because that thing already had a complete ending."

Nagase took another step closer.

"But, you had to bring up old affairs..."

Nagase leaned the top half of her body forward, as though about to exhale her breath onto Taichi's face, and brought her face up to his.

By the time she was close enough that he could count her eyelashes with his naked eyes---

"There's gotta be a limit to being crazy!"

She condemned him in a voice full of rage.

Then, leaving Taichi unable to move a single step, Nagase went around him and left.

Their conversation in the morning seemed to have left Nagase in a very bad mood, so for most of the morning, Taichi was ignored by her.

It was clearly Nagase who had opened her mouth first and told Taichi that she still liked him; this made Taichi very confused. This was much too unreasonable, he thought.

"Hey, Taichi."

During lunch break that day, while Taichi was in a first floor corridor, he was

again seized by Nagase while alone. Nagase wasn't very impassioned or hesitant; she spoke to him very typically.

Simply unfathomable.

Taichi could not understand what Nagase Iori was thinking.

"Say..."

"Wait a second, Nagase, don't you think your attitude this morning is way too different from your attitude right now? You pretended not to know anything during the morning, and even ignored me, and now you're back to normal... What on earth is going on?"

Taichi couldn't make heads or tails of it. These completely different versions of Nagase had appeared several times and had spoken what she had wanted to say, like she was minding her own business. Taichi didn't know which of her words to believe, or what was reality.

"Um... T-That was..."

Nagase had a flustered expression.

"My way of talking... might be a little too crazy, sorry about that. But, the first one to bring this up was clearly Nagase, wasn't it?"

"Back then... I was afraid that others would overhear..."

Nagase murmured timidly, without much confidence; this reaction went beyond Taichi's expectations. He sank into a sort of illusion, as though he were the one excoriating the unfortunate, pretty girl, making him unsure of what to do.

"There had been other people heading to school too back then, hadn't there..."

"Right?"

Regaining her composure, Nagase suddenly looked happy; her mood swings were really quite dramatic.

"Yes indeed, so! When there are other people nearby... you can treat it as though I'm 'pretending'. Only when I'm alone with Taichi... when I say 'this is for

real', is it truly real. You have to remember this password."

Nagase spoke nonstop, rendering Taichi unable to immediately react.

Nagase was supposed to detest being mistaken for 'pretending' to the extreme, and had always distressed over this; it was very difficult to think that she would so recklessly say the word 'pretending' of her own accord.

But Nagase herself had spoken the word.

"... Why do you say that? It's as though the surroundings don't matter at all and you'll only express your true self in front of me---"

"Because I've discovered that, as long as Taichi is here, my world is a complete world."

Nagase revealed a flirtatious smile, as though she were saying, I just told you a very precious secret.

Taichi was baffled by Nagase. He felt that she was speaking the truth; Nagase possessed the power to entice others.

"So, Taichi."

Emitting a woman's scent, the girl beautiful enough to belong to the heavens brought her face close and put her lips close to Taichi's ear, causing Taichi to instantly stiffen.

"---It doesn't matter if you don't break up with Inaban, just go out with me."

Nagase's lips stirred like a dubiously sweet, enchanting flower.

"---It doesn't matter if I'm not in first place."

Taichi frantically put distance between himself and Nagase.

"Nagase, it's wrong to say that---"

Nagase pressed her right hand onto Taichi's lips, sealing his mouth.

Two students who appeared to be first years passed by Taichi and Nagase, shooting curious looks their way.

Waiting until those two were no longer visible, Nagase brought out a notepad and pen, fluidly scribbled words onto a piece of paper, and then handed the paper to Taichi.

“Meet me at the fountain in the park at 5 PM today.”

Chihiro and Enjouji’s class seemed to have some sort of activity today, so neither one of them showed up at the club. Only the five second-year founding members were gathered at the Cultural Research Club.

Nagase looked as though nothing had happened at the club, carefreely chatting and laughing with everyone, but she seemed to be intentionally avoiding Taichi.

Taichi watched the other four talk and laugh from aside, sighed helplessly, and turned his eyes towards his notebook.

He really wasn’t in the mood to solve equations; he was doodling some meaningless patterns with his mechanical pencil, then rubbing them away with his eraser.

“Hey, Inaban, just go like this~!”

“Wah, you idiot! Stop it! Hey, I said... *Pu, guhahahahaha!*”

Nagase horsed around with Inaban, seemingly without a shred of guilt.

Nagase’s normal look was instead brewing up a strange feeling.

Was this type of attitude telling Taichi, *that was just between us two?*

Taichi had seen various expressions from Nagase these past few days.

Since the differences between them had been too great, Taichi even felt that there was an imposter in their midst. But in reality he could confirm that every single Nagase was the true Nagase; even now, he was still unable to comprehend Nagase Iori as a person.

Nagase had told Taichi: “I can’t forget you, and I like you, Taichi.”

Taichi found it difficult to grasp this feeling, unable to grasp Nagase's true thoughts.

Taichi and Nagase had once been favorable towards each other, and if the timing had been right, the two of them should have been dating by now; they had been so fitting for each other, their hearts had once been tightly connected.

But under the teasings of fate, the love between the two had ended without results.

Both of them clearly confirmed this together.

It had been a shocking love. Although immature, it had been true love. Therefore, neither of them had the heart to start again from nothing, and had decided to wipe it all into a clean slate.

But, was Nagase already able to start again from nothing?

What had happened that had incited such an intense change in her state of mind?

If that were the case, then what did he think?

Was he willing to start again from nothing?

After he had confessed, she had accepted, but they hadn't developed to the point of dating; afterwards, he had confessed again and was rejected, and once they had truly understood both of their feelings, the result of their discussion was to reset everything; then, time passed... And now, she was confessing to him that she still liked him.

What will Yaegashi Taichi, who had always adored Nagase Iori, do---

"What's wrong, Taichi?"

"Huh?"

Inaba was peeking concernedly at Taichi.

Once Inaba stopped showing off, she would frankly expose her own feelings. Watching Inaba's natural beauty illustrate rich expressions put Taichi's heart at ease more than any scenery could.

His cold heart slowly regained its warmth.

“No, it’s nothing.”

His girlfriend was Inaba Himeko.

The person most important to him right now was Inaba Himeko.

“Really? You seemed preoccupied last night when I was on the phone with you.”

Inaba’s bright eyes reflected Taichi’s figure.

“Nah, nothing like that.”

Taichi replied, looking away; he didn’t want Inaba to see through his thoughts right now. It was as though he was betraying her; this made Taichi’s chest tighten up.

Catching sight of the situation, Nagase piped up to tease Inaba:

“Ooh~, wah~, Inaban’s pampering Taichi again~, it’s so flashy~, where are my shades?”

“N-Nothing wrong with that, w-we’re dating, anyway... Say, you’ve been teasing me all day, what about Taichi?!”

Taichi’s heart had been disturbed so much by Nagase that even his girlfriend, whom he loved the most, was concerned *for* him.

What an ugly good-for-nothing he was.

To resolve this chaotic situation, he had to do as Nagase said: head to the park and meet her there.

Thinking this, right before club activities were about to end, Taichi spoke up: “I have things to do,” and prepared to leave first. Since the time written on the note was 5:00 pm, if he waited until club activities ended before leaving the building, he wouldn’t be able to arrive at the designated location on time.

Even as Taichi got up to leave, Nagase still showed no reaction at all. Was she planning to leave later, so as not to arouse suspicion?

“Where are you going? I’ll come with you.”

Inaba said, but Taichi firmly rejected her. Seeing Inaba look hurt, Taichi felt a stabbing pain in his heart.

The park Nagase was referring to was close to the school, in the opposite direction from Taichi’s path to school. The park was indescribably large, but Nagase had indicated “at the fountain” so they should be able to meet successfully.

Taichi cast a sidelong glance at the currently practicing sports club, left the field, and headed for the park.

What in the world was Nagase thinking right now? What was she trying to do?

Taichi was still unable to determine Nagase’s true thoughts, or what Nagase was going to do, so he had no way of taking countermeasures.

Taichi was furious at his own inability, but just on his own, he was unable to discern what was normal; if there were someone to give him an objective opinion, that would be a different story. Yes, if he could find someone to consult about this situation, that would be great. If he worried about it on his own, he would occasionally run into dead ends; if he could observe things from someone else’s perspective, sometimes problems would be very easily solved.

Taichi was aware of this, but who would he consult for this sort of thing?

Just then, the air suddenly trembled.

“Hey, Yaegashi-kun.”

As though descending from the sky, a resounding voice filled with dignity made Taichi turn his head around to look behind him.

A girl with glasses flashing like the flames of hope and hair tied to the back of her head to expose her forehead, wearing a uniform as straight as a ramrod, whose appearance would seem to be published in a tour guide handbook introducing the school. This girl, who emitted the style of individuality from all over her body --- was Fujishima Maiko.

Fujishima’s upright stature made others recall the era during which she was acclaimed as the strongest class president.

“Fuji... shima?”

The timing of her appearance was simply too coincidental; Taichi couldn't help but emit a foolish voice.

“There's something you want to consult me about, isn't there?”

This was too opportune, something like this could actually happen? He had just been half-jokingly fantasizing, *if it were that person, she could probably give me some good suggestions*, and the person had appeared right before his eyes. Furthermore, it was the Fujishima everyone was hoping would revive once more, to before she became weak; this was like a dream.

Without a shred of suspicion, it wouldn't hurt for Taichi to tell her about it in this sort of situation, would it? If he didn't take this opportunity to say it, when would he?

“Can you promise to absolutely never tell anyone about this?”

“Don't look down upon me, okay?”

Ahh, this can't be wrong.

This was the Fujishima from before, the class president more dependable than anyone else.

“Fujishima, you should know roughly what's happening, so I'll keep it short. To be honest, recently... Nagase's been telling me, ‘I can't forget you, and I still like you’... Don't tell anyone!”

“Go for it.”

Fujishima responded at once.

She didn't show a shred of hesitation, not even giving Taichi time to think.

“Huh?”

“So, just go for it.”

“What do you mean... by ‘go for it’?”

He really wanted Fujishima to give him an answer.

“I'm telling you to pursue both relationships at the same time.”

But, this wasn't the answer Taichi was hoping for; it was the answer he could absolutely never hope for.

"Uh, but... in a certain sense, that response does have a very Fujishima-like feel to it."

If it were the Fujishima who advocated free romance, she would very likely say that. But, even so, it seemed a little off, didn't it? Even if it were such advocacy, if it were Fujishima, she would say it in another way.

But, Fujishima seemed to see through Taichi's wavering, and staunchly declared: "That would be so-called happiness, that would be the correct path, because that way, everyone can be happy."

Fujishima said with a benevolent smile like that of a goddess.

"Trust me."

Ka-chunk, ka-chunk.

Gears that were not supposed to move roared loudly, and began to turn.

Was this path really the path he should take?

Taichi arrived at the fountain Nagase indicated.

Elderly folk were walking their dogs, and primary school students were romping in all directions on bicycles. The park in the evening was peaceful in this way, but Taichi's heart would not calm, a storm tearing about inside him.

On his way to the fountain, Taichi could not stop worrying over the words that Fujishima had thrown his way.

"Romance Expert", "Missionary of Love", "Romance Goddess" --- the suggestion that Fujishima, with those joking nicknames, had given him.

Without even thinking about it, he knew that pursuing both relationships at the same time was absolutely the wrong move.

It was clearly the wrong move, but hearing Fujishima declare it so resolutely and decisively... No, it was definitely still wrong.

Taichi chased these silly thoughts from his brain.

Nagase should be arriving soon; he had already prepared himself mentally,

and now awaited her arrival.

Her frighteningly flirtatious look when she had been alone with Taichi during break again floated into Taichi's mind.

---It doesn't matter if you don't break up with Inaban, just go out with me.

---It doesn't matter if I'm not in first place.

The words, accompanied by a warm, exhaled breath, stuck in Taichi's ears like honey, unable to be shaken off. Sweet fragrance disturbed Taichi's mind.

But, no, it was impossible.

Even if Fujishima gave him a hard shove, it was still impossible.

Even if Taichi thought Fujishima was a very awesome and dependable person, such a statement was still a little off...

A little off?

Yes, something had always been a little off. He didn't know when it had started, but he had felt a little off. But in his own life, there shouldn't be anything off---

"Huh? Whatcha up to, Taichi?"

Taichi shivered for a moment, seeking the owner of the voice.

Who was it? It wasn't Nagase.

Kiriyama Yui was standing a slight distance away from Taichi.

"... Kiriyama?"

Why would Kiriyama be here? Taichi thought as he looked to the side, and saw Uwa Chihiro also present.

"I go to the dojo today, so I wanted to leave for home earlier, and then I saw Chihiro-kun running this way. I thought Chihiro-kun might have forgotten that we needed to go to the dojo today, so I chased after him... and then, since Chihiro-kun wanted to run away, I just continued to chase him here."

Kiriyama shrugged, glancing towards Chihiro. Chihiro's expression looked very awkward.

“Well, what’re you doing, Taichi? Waiting for someone?”

“... Y-Yeah, you could say that.”

In the end, no matter how late Taichi stayed, Nagase did not appear at the agreed location.

Chapter 3: This World Really is xxx

Month: O

Day: X

Cloudy After Rain

The team wanted to discuss the Cheer Competition today, and our class's rep went too. Since the reps were all people who lost at jankenpon, they all looked pretty surly about it.

Is this really okay?... I thought that and, unsurprisingly, Inaba-senpai told them off really sternly: "You first years are showing no spirit whatsoever!" She usually looks really cute when she's all bashful in front of Taichi-senpai, but other than that, Inaba-senpai is a little... scary.

Maybe I could've mediated the situation, so I tried my best, but if they mistook it as showing off I might have gotten yelled at, so all I did was attempt to make a few suggestions. I'm brave now! I'm pretty amazing, if I do say so myself... I can, right? I do say so myself. Even if it's a tiny one, it's still a step forward.

But my "attempts" didn't seem noticeable at all, so they were skimmed over.

I attempted to do my best, but it looks like I've failed again, and I feel like I'm going to lose my confidence soon. But this also shows that there are better mediators than me. I hope I can become like them someday, if possible.

Ah, my senpais seem to be a bit out of it, am I worrying too much?

+++

Uwa Chihiro organized what he remembered of the discussion topics into a text document, saved it, and closed his laptop. He then stood from his chair and

left his room.

He crossed the living room and headed for the kitchen. The television was displaying some entertainer engaging in some boring punishment game^[1] and roaring with laughter, while his little brother was giggling like an idiot along with him, watching the scene.

He retrieved a PET bottle of water from the refrigerator, and poured some into a glass.

“Chihiro, are you still able to keep up with the high school workload? Can you keep up with the teachers’ paces?” His mother asked.

“No big deal, it’s pretty easy.”

“I see. You should have no problem, but...”

His mother spoke and broke off, hesitating over whether to continue. *If you have something to say, spit it out.*

“Are you... happy at school? You got into this current school because you didn’t get into your first choice school, right? So I’m very worried...”

You didn’t need to nag at the end there. If this were a normal situation, he’d undoubtedly be vexed by this, but he just couldn’t care less right now since he hadn’t the time to nitpick like that.

“Yeah, I guess I’m pretty happy.”

He *had* been very content recently, indeed.

Could he really pull off something like that? When Chihiro had first begun to use that power, he’d felt intensely uneasy, and moreover, he’d been dubious from the outset.

But after that power had brought about dramatic results, Chihiro, who had originally suspected it to be some sort of grand prank, was now thoroughly convinced that it was real. If this were a prank, it was much too elaborate.

Chihiro had met that guy, who had asked him: *Do you want to try and make this utterly boring world into something more interesting?* At first he thought it

was a joke in poor taste, but judging from that guy's rather unusual manner, Chihiro could tell that he was serious.

That guy had told him that he was only *borrowing* someone else's body, and was not the same guy as he appeared to be; moreover, he had proved it by exchanging souls with Chihiro.

Never in his wildest dreams had Chihiro ever expected the opportunity to experience such an unrealistic phenomenon as a personality exchange.

After that, he had met that guy a few more times.

That guy told Chihiro about what he had previously done to his current targets, and conversely, he wanted Chihiro to answer some rather personal questions. When he asked the guy afterwards, he learned that those questions seemed to be an interview of sorts. Luckily enough, those questions seemed to clarify his own thoughts quite a bit.

Then, the guy had declared Chihiro eligible, and Chihiro had received power.

The conditions were simple: make those guys more interesting.

It felt *amazing* to use that power.

His decision to make Yaegashi Taichi his first target should be correct. Just as expected, that stupid goody-two-shoes was easily fooled.

The upperclassmen of the Cultural Research Club saw him as a partner within the club, shared their experiences over the year with him, and their interpersonal relationships among the members. Thinking back on it now, he was incredibly lucky to have this sort of experience. It was thanks to their explanations that he was able to establish a plan to shake them up.

Stage One was more or less a success... He should be able to say that.

The lines he had prepared for himself after an initial investigation contained not a single deviation; he was delighted when the other person's actions exceeded his own expected development of events; it was also a great bonus to know that he could even turn into a complete stranger.

He was on the right path; he should continue this plan of action.

If he had the will, he could of course bring about something even more

shocking, but that would be unwise. If this were something anyone could do, why was he chosen?

This was merely a process in his ascension.

However, this was a rare opportunity that had come by, and since he was asking those guys to become his stepping stones he should at least return the favor.

So he wanted to tell them.

--- How utterly fragile they are, these bonds that you all believe in so much.

--- How utterly fleeting it is, the feeling of being convinced that you have only a single thing to truly love.

It was their prerogative if they wished to revel in youth, and Chihiro thought that was good.

However, even so, they needed to recognize reality.

This world would not let people place their utmost trust in some stupid words and live on, keeping perfect fantasies. He knew this, and so he wanted to tell them the truth of this world.

He very much wished that he could sincerely thank the one who had bestowed upon him this wonderful power: <Heartseed>.



Chihiro arrived at school very early, with plenty of time before class began. This was slowly becoming a habit of his.

He feigned the intent to head off somewhere, hanging out all throughout the building, especially in areas where the Cultural Research Club upperclassmen seemed to come and go. The ideal location would seem to be the floor where the second year classrooms were, but if he went there too often it would attract attention, and it felt a bit embarrassing.

Should he actively devise a more meticulous tactic? Chihiro gave it some

thought, but recalling his past experiences, even as something suddenly came up, he was surprisingly still able to successfully wing it. After all, there were limits to the screenplay he could write on his own, and it might not be a bad thing to go with the flow and play it by ear.

He discovered a familiar figure from behind, near the faculty office. An existence with black hair that drifted with the wind, whose mere gait could create something like a scene from a movie --- Nagase Iori.

There was a girl in the school who was pretty enough to shock the heavens --- Chihiro didn't find it difficult to comprehend the existence of this rumor. To those guys who were only interested in matters of a lower dimension, she ought to be an ideal object of gossip.

Regarding the power that <Heartseed> had conferred him, that guy had said: ... *A name? It doesn't have any special name...* So Chihiro had given it a name of his own: "Fantasy Projection".

"Fantasy Projection" was a power that could make others mistake him for someone else.

Its activation conditions were very simple, one only needed to make a declaration in front of the other person.

Chihiro pressed towards Iori from behind; there was no one whom he recognized in sight. Deciding that a short moment would be fine, he opened his mouth:

"[Yaegashi Taichi as Nagase Iori views him.]"

No one else heard Chihiro's voice; it was transmitted assuredly into Nagase's ears.

However, Nagase should have been unable to interpret Chihiro's voice as it was, because it was like a hypnotizing password.

Chihiro [Taichi] spoke to Nagase.

"Hey, Nagase."

"Huh? Ah, morning, Taichi."

Nagase turned her head and replied.

Right now, Nagase Iori would undoubtedly, assuredly see Uwa Chihiro as Yaegashi Taichi. Whether it was his demeanor, voice, or actions, to Nagase, he was Taichi. This was "Fantasy Projection".

Even so, as it was, Chihiro's body of course had no way of physically transforming into Yaegashi Taichi. This was merely applying a suggestion of sorts to the other person, in order to have them believe so.

This sort of power resembled a signal that could interfere with someone's mind. When Chihiro thought <Heartseed> was going to explain it, he instead went: *"Ahh... Why do I need to explain the logic behind this... there's no need at all... Anyway, that's how it'll be, please understand it as that..."* The discussion was then concluded, therefore Chihiro was not familiar with the specifics.

The short of it was, "Fantasy Projection" directly interfered with another person's mind, but Uwa Chihiro was still Uwa Chihiro to other people nearby, so he must remain vigilant of his surroundings.

"Could I have a word?"

Despite speaking as he usually would, when Nagase Iori heard it, it would automatically be converted into Yaegashi Taichi's tone of voice. It would be slowed by half a beat, but Chihiro was also able to hear his automatically converted voice once he finished speaking.

Putting aside their differences in clothing, even the person's belongings - like their phone, even if it were a different model, would be mentally compensated for by the target's mind. If the situation were one-on-one, it would be utterly impossible for him to be outed as an imposter.

However, "Fantasy Projection" could only be used upon Taichi and the others: the five second-years of the Cultural Research Club.

This was the current restriction that <Heartseed> had placed upon him.

"... Yeah, sure."

Nagase nodded, a little hesitantly. Perhaps it was due to the fact that the atmosphere between her and Taichi had been slightly awkward as of late.

This was completely the effect of Chihiro's attacks.

"Are you fancying anyone lately?"

"You're talking about that stuff again..."

Nagase's brows knit together somewhat crossly.

"... Well, it's not like we *can't* discuss that stuff. We can if you want to, but don't you think that it's been a little awkward between us lately? It makes me think, *is this really the moment to ask?* You shouldn't be *that* dense, Taichi..."

"I want to know for sure."

Chihiro [Taichi] pressed. As long as he hardened his tone, his voice would change according to its strength. To Nagase, it ought to sound like [Taichi] saying it in a strong manner.

"So... um..."

Additionally, Chihiro had learned something recently. Nagase Iori had a habit of not saying no, to an unexpected degree.

Normally carefree, Nagase looked to be a headstrong person who fit the words "arbitrary action" and "blind progression" very well. However, although she was strong when taking the initiative, if the other person put on an equally strong attitude, she actually wouldn't know how to respond.

This was something that not many people had discovered, but Chihiro knew.

Nagase sank into silence.

In a place where people would frequently pass by, the risks that came with using "Fantasy Projection" increased tenfold.

"Forget it, forget I asked. Well, I've got stuff to do, so I'll catch you later."

Chihiro [Taichi] said, and left the scene.

Nagase looked as though she intended to say something, but Chihiro decided to ignore her.

The release condition of "Fantasy Projection" was to have the "suggested" person realize that the one who had instigated the power (Chihiro, in this case) had left them. In this situation, for example, if Chihiro rounded the corridor

corner and completely vanished from Nagase's sight, the "Fantasy Projection" being used on Nagase would end, and if Uwa Chihiro were to appear before her once more, she would be able to tell with certainty that it was him. Chihiro rounded the corner. Now, this instance had ended.

Although, romance, friendship, romance, friendship... These guys really are playing that game.



During break after second period, the Cheer Competition rep from Class 2-D, part of the green team during the upcoming athletics festival, paid a visit to Chihiro's Class 1-B. He had come to remind Chihiro to attend lunch practice.

"What a drag."

Shimono, who sat in front, twisted his body around and flopped down on Chihiro's desk.

"You're in my way."

Chihiro gently poked Shimono's head, and Shimono pushed himself up. He wore a pair of black, plastic-framed glasses and sported a casual hairstyle. Whether it was studying or exercise, nothing was particularly difficult for him, but he never really tried his best because of his languid approach to everything, so he always remained at a so-so level.

"This athletics festival or whatever is so exhausting. Of course, it's real nice that we don't have to go to class during the festival itself, but for several weeks beforehand we gotta start practicing for the Cheer Competition. It's so annoying. Or should I say, it's *soooooo annoying*."

"You're more annoying to me right now."

"Heh~."

Laughter came from behind.

Chihiro turned to look and saw Enjouji Shino standing frozen to the spot with

an “Oh no” expression on her face, hands pressed over her mouth.

“What do you want?”

“N-Nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing.”

“Uhhm...”

“What d’you mean by ‘*Uhhm*’?”

Enjouji looked visibly terrified. She was petite; she looked as though a sudden gust of strong wind might blow her away.

Enjouji looked down embarrassedly and sputtered:

“Chi-Chihiro-kun... No! Uwa-kun!”

Didn’t she agree not to call him by his first name in class? That was much too slow!

Enjouji coughed two times to clear her throat, and restarted:

“Um... Uwa-kun, the things you guys were just talking about... were very interesting.”

“Were you eavesdropping on us? What about our conversation was interesting?”

“I-I just happened to hear it. I don’t know why, but I thought it was interesting.”

Her perceptiveness was incomprehensible.

“Enjouji-san, do you think I’m very interesting too?” Shimono asked.

You? Forget it. --- Chihiro thought, but kept silent.

“Uh... Um, I thought Shimono-kun’s ‘*soooo annoying*’ was really interesting.”

“See, Uwa? You turn a blind eye to it, but Enjouji-san understands my charm.”

“Listen more closely, Shimono. She’s just telling you that you’re really annoying.”

“Wha... I’m not *soooo annoying*!”

Shimono said comically, letting loose all of his talent.

“Ha... Ha ha...”

But Enjouji merely laughed dryly a few times out of courtesy.

Awkward silence. Dragging it any further wouldn't fire things up either.

Shimono looked embarrassed, as though intending to cut this topic short as quickly as possible.

“By the way, Enjouji, don't you have other things to do?”

“Ah... Y-Yeah! I need to get my notebook back from Tomomi-san... I'll see you later, then.”

Enjouji bowed her head quickly at Shimono in farewell, then headed for the front of the classroom.

Shimono watched Enjouji's figure from behind as she departed, murmuring as he grinned dully: “Hey, Enjouji-san just called you ‘Chihiro-kun’. You guys dating?”

What an utterly boring question to ask, but a common one nonetheless. Asking such a question was basically an unwritten rule after such a situation occurred, so Shimono was merely abiding by an utterly boring rule.

“Not at all. Enjouji only calls me that because the other people in my club do the same thing to each other.”

“I see~.”

Shimono looked suspicious, but didn't pursue the matter. Although Shimono would act according to rules, he also knew how to read the situation, so Chihiro didn't hate him at all.

“Enjouji-san, though~. Her introverted personality and childlike manner seem to give her a lot of trouble~. But it's pretty cute all the same. How should I say it? She makes other people feel that rather than being a girlfriend, she's better off being a pet.”

“Is that your fetish?”

“Hey, it's rare for you to play dumb, Uwa!”

Actually, it was Chihiro who was taking Shimono for an idiot.

“Ah~, but how do I put it...”

Shimono surveyed the classroom, and Chihiro followed his gaze. A guy by himself, two to three people sitting together chatting; everyone had circumscribed their own little group to pass the break time.

“There really is an ocean between the guys and the girls.”

Hearing Shimono mutter like that, Chihiro assented with a grunt.

The students had divided themselves up into the boy group and the girl group; not a single mixed circle was visible.

“Isn’t that how it always is during break?”

“I just think that things could livelier... Ah, I was just talking to Enjouji-san, too. If I can turn this into a fuse, and slowly expand the battlefield...”

“What’s your willingness to go to the front line?”

“Zero.”

“Then you’re done for.”

“Can’t I just leave the vanguard stuff to you, Uwa? Besides, Enjouji seems to like you more. You lead the charge and destroy the enemy’s fortifications, and if you succeed, I’ll be right behind you!”

“What if I perish gloriously in battle?”

“I’ll prepare the recreational facilities and do my best to await your return.”

“So you’re planning to abandon and forget me, right? You really are done for.”

“Aw~, fight hard, Uwa~. The day I see you successfully carve out a niche, I will enter the fight as well.”

Irresponsible as he was, his frank attitude was actually rather likeable, and Chihiro was in no position to talk anyway.

Out of the corner of his eye, Chihiro noticed the door at the front of the classroom opening and a tall boy walking in.

“Oh, hey, Tada.”

Shimono greeted the boy, then told him in a staccato voice:

“Today, after, school, there, will, be, practice.”

“Huh?! I didn’t know that!”

Tada lamented exaggeratedly. His slightly long brown hair and hand jewelry gave a sloppy impression, but if you talked with him, you would find that he was pretty easy to get along with. It felt suitable for him to be everyone’s leader, standing at the front, but he personally did not enjoy that, always emphasizing: “I couldn’t do that! I’m more suited to idle around in the back.”

“I really didn’t know that...”

“Well, now you do.”

“Hey, thanks for the roast, Uwa... You kidding me? Practice again?... All we need to do is prepare a little before the competition! That’s why I don’t wanna be the rep, or whatever!”

At Tada’s bemoaning, Shimono spoke like an old man getting drunk:

“Let’s get along from now on, *Jan*^[2] Loser Brother Three!”

“Don’t call me that! You’re gonna give me negative energy that I won’t be able to shake off!”

Shimono and Tada put on an insipid mini-performance, roaring with laughter.

This was boring beyond belief. Even Chihiro laughed.

“Oh, right, what did you guys watch on TV last night at ten? Of course, it was--
_”

Tada opened Pandora’s box. Chihiro didn’t pay him any specific attention, letting the words go in one ear and out the other. That way, Tada’s voice sounded like nothing more than meaningless drivel. Shimono’s voice conversing with Tada’s became equally meaningless.

Noise without meaning, creating absolutely nothing at all, leaving no traces anywhere in the world, slowly elapsing away.

Chihiro thought that, but Tada and Shimono were oblivious. They continued

chatting away.

This place where he existed was a world that was exactly this boring, boring beyond belief.

Nevertheless, his own world, right now, was everything but that.



To confirm his power, Chihiro experimented for a few days. Every one of the five second-years in the Cultural Research Club experienced “Fantasy Projection” at least once.

During lunch break, after he ate, Chihiro paid a visit behind the school building.

He ducked into the shade of the trees, verifying whether Aoki, whom he had spent some effort to summon, was indeed present at the agreed location.

He saw someone: Aoki Yoshifumi.

You didn’t know something until you tried it. Chihiro wanted to see whether the stuff Aoki went around wantonly shouting had any truth to it.

There was a slight distance between them.

Chihiro raised his voice, enough for Aoki to hear.

“[The one whom Aoki Yoshifumi views as his object of romantic interest.]”

Aoki suddenly looked towards him, a dumb grin on his face.

“Oh, Yui.”

It appeared that “Fantasy Projection” had definitely worked.

“Fantasy Projection” was a power that utilized the impressions inside another person’s head and induced an illusion, and could be activated even without indicating a name. On the other hand, since this power relied on the other

person's memories, it was impossible to become someone whom that person did not know, or someone whom that person very strongly believed would not be here --- putting it a bit extremely, it was impossible to become a dead person. Moreover, if a totally, utterly, completely irresolvable paradox occurred, apparently something very troublesome would happen.

The person whom Aoki liked was, as expected, Kiriya Yui.

If Aoki had called out someone else's name, then things would have been interesting.

"What's the matter, Yui? Why're you calling me aside like this all of a sudden?"

Aoki asked, all relaxed. He'd been summoned somewhere without many people, yet didn't show a sliver of anxiety. Wouldn't a normal person think this to be some sort of major confession? Aoki would never put on a "just like normal" attitude to help the other person relax, would he?

"Ah, um, uh... Well, that is..."

Chihiro couldn't help but stutter a bit.

"Fantasy Projection" was equipped with perfect compensation: Chihiro needed only to speak normally, and Aoki would automatically hear it as Yui's voice and tone. He understood this much, but he was still worried; if he spoke entirely in a boy's tone, would he be found out? Even so, having to mimic a girl's tone would really be too gross.

Aoki was gazing at Chihiro [Yui] with a tender expression.

... This is disgusting. Judging by the scene, they would be two boys gazing at each other.

Chihiro pulled himself together:

"Could you do something for me?"

He accidentally spoke in a girl's tone. Maybe he was overthinking it.

"Sure! If it's a request from you, Yui, no matter when, no matter what, I'm very willing to serve!"

Aoki genuinely had an attitude of wanting to help realize any wish, whatever it was.

It was clearly baseless, yet he was willing to talk big like it was nothing --- people like him were very frightening.

Chihiro wanted to test exactly how frightening he could be.

“I can’t really explain the details, but for a certain reason, there’s something I really, really need to ask of you, Aoki-senpai, no matter what. Are you all right with that?”

Chihiro [Yui] spoke in a normal tone of voice.

“Leave it to me!” “Well, starting from now until I tell you to stop, no matter when, could you not talk to me? I can’t reveal the details, but it’s really because of a certain reason. Even if I talk to you of my own accord, could I ask you to not be too unsubtle, skimp over it naturally, and just ignore my existence?”

“... You want me... to ignore you... Yui?”

“Yeah.”

Aoki looked blank.

Chihiro could understand how he felt. If he had heard this sort of request, he would also be confused and think it unintelligible.

It really was meaningless, in actuality.

“Of course, it’s not like I never want to talk to you again, but for certain reasons, I have to do this no matter what. When I want to stop this request, I’ll call you here again, and when I tell you, it’s okay now... That’s how it’ll work, is that okay?”

Aoki kept silent, looking downwards as he sank into thought. “Uh... my health won’t be able to take it that way...” He murmured back and forth, muttering unintelligibly.

This request was too reckless, after all? Chihiro [Yui] thought, and just as he was able to retract what he said---

“Okay, I got it!”

Hey, hey, what did you get... Chihiro [Yui] silently retorted.

“I will ignore you, Yui! I only have to pretend like I’m ignoring you, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“To be honest, I can’t think of a single reason or explanation why you would do this, but as I’ve said before, as long as you request it, Yui, I will put forth my full effort into helping you realize it, no matter what it is! Just relax and leave it to me!”

Aoki declared with head raised and chest out, as though without a shred of confusion.

Chihiro was stunned, or rather, maintained a respectful distance.

Was he really willing to straightforwardly accept even unfathomable requests? Why? That kind of world was really quite disgusting and incomprehensible.

Maybe he had once thought that sort of world impressive, but he didn’t want to go there. There was an insurmountable abyss between that world and this world.

Besides, since he’d received such crushing power, there was already no need to run to that world any more.

Then, when it was time to go to the club, Chihiro unexpectedly became the first member to arrive.

After a while, Kiriama Yui and Taichi arrived too.

“Ah, Chihiro-kun, you came first, that’s unusual.” Yui beamed.

“... Why do you look so happy, senpai?”

“Because~, if you can start liking the Cultural Research Club a lot, Chihiro-kun, won’t that make me really happy~?”

“I’ve never said anything of the sort, have I?”

“I know that just from your attitude! Just from your attitude!”

Yui said, exasperated, pointing at Chihiro unabashedly. Her arched eyebrows stood even higher, and her slightly raised eyes raised even more, but she didn't give one a stern impression, probably due to her petite figure, looking cute instead.

"Is that what you think?"

"That's exactly what I think!"

Kiriyama's so firm, what a headstrong Miss High-and-Mighty.

"Kiriyama and Chihiro look so happy when they're together."

"No!"

"No way!"

The two of them fired back at Taichi.

Since they had said nearly the same thing, Chihiro's expression contorted awkwardly, but Yui seemed not to care as much. This made his chest feel stuffy for some reason.

"Ah~, today feels like it'll be a good day, though~."

At this, Taichi replied to Yui:

"But more than half of today has already passed."

"I know that even if you don't point it out!"

A good day?

Today might be a good day indeed, Yui-senpai--- Chihiro murmured silently.

"Did something funny happen? Chihiro-kun?"

"No, not really, it's nothing."

Yui peeked at Chihiro's face. Chihiro turned away, fleeing those clear eyes.

Afterwards, the club members assembled one after another, and Aoki finally arrived as well.

"Yo~, hey everyone! And Yu... *Urmgufshll!*"

Aoki let loose a queer noise as he slapped both hands over his mouth.

“Hey, you’re gross.” Inaba said coldly.

“At least be a little more emotional when you talk, Inaba! Don’t say it so matter-of-factly!”

Hearing Aoki complain like that, Nagase spoke to Enjouji:

“But it can’t be helped anyway! Right, Shino-chan?”

“Yup, because he really is very gross.”

“I get it! I’m really sorry!”

“What the heck are you up to?” Yui sighed.

Silence.

Tranquility.

Yui hadn’t been looking at Aoki, but now she turned towards him, astonished.

A strange atmosphere settled within the room, and everyone turned to look at Aoki.

“Hey, Aoki... What in the world just happened?”

Taichi broke the strange atmosphere, and Aoki looked as though he’d been rescued.

“That was... I wanted to keep my promise like I said, but I almost botched it from force of habit... I decided to ignore that! Habits are scary.”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about.” Taichi replied.

The club returned to its original atmosphere, and finally, he couldn’t bear it anymore --- and began to snigger quietly.

Damn, he’ll be found out... He thought, but he was unable to suppress the rising corners of his mouth.

This was hilarious. He was only speaking his mind at random about something he’d thought of half-jokingly, but Aoki was actually, desperately trying to do it. This was so stupid it was hysterical. Chihiro was enchanted with his own might, that he was able to mess with someone to this degree. He’d never feel incomparable to anyone ever again.

“Chihiro... kun?”

He was violently jolted back to reality, and looked towards where the voice had come from --- Enjouji.

“W-What?”

“Uh... Um, I saw that you had your head down and you were trembling, so I wanted to ask what’s wrong...”

Nagase and Inaba were shouting loudly at each other to his side, and Taichi was just about to help arbitrate them.

“Ahh, it’s nothing.”

“... Really?”

Enjouji nodded, but she looked very mindful of him all the same, and kept stealing glances at Chihiro from time to time.

A cold shiver ran through him. She hadn’t discovered his secret, had she?

Then, Yui turned towards Aoki.

Chihiro perked up his ears. Taichi and the other girls were still arguing, and somehow Nagase had sucked Enjouji in as well. Currently, only he was listening closely to Yui and Aoki’s conversation.

“Hey, Aoki, during P.E. today!”

Yui spoke to Aoki.

One, two, three seconds later, Aoki did not display any reaction whatsoever.

“Um... Aoki---”

“Ah, I need to go to the bathroom!”

Aoki stood up in a rush while saying this, then frantically exited the clubroom.

“Ao... ki?”

Yui reached out after him like a child abandoned by her parents, then dropped her hand quickly.

Beneath her long, shining chestnut hair, Yui’s expression was visible.

She looked extremely hurt.

She looked extremely lonely.

Why did she look like she was about to cry?

She was always complaining about a guy called Aoki at the dojo, about what a drag Aoki was, how much she wanted to teach this Aoki guy a lesson, complaining so many times that one wanted to ask her whether she was tired of saying it.

And yet, it turned out that Kiriya Yui...

--- Whatever, it doesn't matter.



Chihiro's next target was Inaba Himeko, who had left everyone at the train station after school and headed home alone. Chihiro had recently been leaving the club early when it was about to end, under the pretense of "something happening at home, I need to leave early for a while".

He lay low outside the station's ticket stile, waiting, watching for a moment during which there would be no people near them.

"[The person whom Inaba Himeko likes the most.]"

"Huh? Taichi?"

Without any surprise or amazement whatsoever, Inaba mistook Chihiro for Yaegashi Taichi, deeply believing without a doubt that it was him.

"What's wrong? Didn't you go home?... Y-You're not here to see me, are you?..."

Inaba explained according to her own initiative; her face even reddened.

Although Yui praised Inaba as icily clever and unstoppable once she pulled out

her big guns, Chihiro found that quite difficult to believe.

He was suddenly curious: how far had these two progressed?

“Hey, Taichi, why don’t you just come to my place---”

“Let’s break up.”

Chihiro [Taichi] said.

Actually, Chihiro was originally planning to introduce it in a more meandering fashion, but as soon as he saw Inaba’s unusually happy expression, he couldn’t help but want to strike her down in one blow, to deeply, deeply harm her.

“... Huh?”

Time froze for Inaba; a lopsided smile still clung to her face.

Yui’s hurt expression floated into his mind.

Why would it appear now? This had nothing to do with that.

Today he had carried out a plan he’d designed with “Fantasy Projection” and successfully achieved his goal.

There had been no hitches whatsoever; everything had gone perfectly, and he should be happy, but for some unfathomable reason, Chihiro somehow felt jittery.

“You’re so annoying, you talk too much. Honestly, I’m fed up with you.”

Chihiro stepped into Taichi’s shoes; it felt like he was singly, murkily extracting the cruelest portion of his heart and mercilessly skewering Inaba, piercing her soul.

“... Huh?”

Inaba’s expression looked as though she had learned of the day that this world would end.

Chihiro genuinely felt that he, alone, could bring about the end of someone’s world.

In a certain sense, he was a god.

For what reason would someone as extraordinary as he feel jittery towards

other matters? How could he remain mired in such insignificant affairs? He wouldn't be satisfied with merely this; he wanted to ascend to higher ground.

"Nah, I was just kidding."

Chihiro [Taichi] said, returning to his usual tone when facing Inaba.

"Huh... Ah... Kidding?"

"Yeah, just kidding. Why would Tai... I say something like that? Please forget what I just said, and don't mention it tomorrow."

"Ah... Yeah, that's... Yeah."

Inaba murmured as though consoling herself, revealing a complicated expression, like she had breathed a huge sigh a relief yet was about to cry at the same time.

"Bye. Please keep your end of the promise."

Huh? Ah, yeah... S-See you tomorrow!"

Without looking back, Chihiro [Taichi] left and disappeared from Inaba's view.

Absolutely inseparable, the bond between those two was invulnerable --- Yet with just a single sentence, he could easily disturb that relationship of theirs.

The relationships between people were as weak as that, unable to withstand a single blow. If one knew this and still desperately wanted to maintain those relationships, wasn't that really quite stupid? Whether it was everyone, or her.

Chihiro had always believed that this world was boring beyond belief, filled with people imprisoned by absurdly ignorant fixed ideas, an absurdly ignorant world. He had once given up, thinking that he could only be buried within.

But he had been chosen. He had been chosen, and he had received power.

If it were now, Chihiro could say it.

--- This world really is quite fascinating.

Isn't it?

Translator's Notes:

[1] Batsu game. For more info: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Batsu_game

[2] *Jankenpon*. Rock-paper-scissors.

Chapter 4: An Opened Door Can't Be Closed Again

Month: O

Day: X

Clear

Something's off, something's definitely wrong. The senpais all look off, they all look off... I say that, but whenever I try to think of exactly where they are off as a whole, I draw a complete blank.

What should I do?

I'd like to help if it's something I can manage myself, and I hope that my senpais can return to how they were before.

So I've been trying to investigate the reason, and thinking hard while putting a lot of passion into it. This time I have to pluck up my courage and act.

But this time, like always, I couldn't help with anything at all... Whatever, I've always known that I can't do anything... No! Stop this sort of negative thinking! Next time, I'll definitely, next time...

You know, I talk like that, but I'm really only just a bystander. Ahh, urgh.

Come to think of it, I feel like Chihiro-kun's changed a bit lately... Should I say that he seems to have become really strong, or really amazing?... Or maybe he's received something from someone?

+++

Uwa Chihiro's household --- the Uwa household, was nothing to write home about.

They were a family of four comprised of his father, mother, and younger brother, living in a 3-LDK^[1] condominium apartment purchased on a 25-year mortgage. His father was a salaryman, and his pay was acceptable. They couldn't live too extravagantly, but as long as his father wasn't laid off, they shouldn't have to worry about the mortgage or child-raising expenses; an outstandingly average middle-class family.

In the morning, the table was stacked with simple salad and toast. Chihiro, his father, and his brother sat at the table, his mother in the kitchen preparing

bento for him and his brother.

Chihiro spread butter onto his toast and bit into it.

The three of them didn't talk.

His father sipped coffee and read the paper. His brother had slept very late last night after staying in a chatroom or playing games, so he was eating breakfast very slowly with his eyes half-closed.

The only sound was the empty echo of the television.

This was an everyday morning; it had repeated several times, several tens of times, several hundreds of times.

His father stood and left the table to tidy up his appearance. He had been working at his current company ever since graduating from school, and needed to go to work today as well.

Chihiro had always been under the impression that he would become like this one day as well. He, too, would walk the same road as his father, walk the same road as people who reached a certain level in this world.

Chihiro wasn't really dissatisfied. This was very typical, and if he considered all types of personal gain in the whole of Japan, he could even say that he was living a winner's life. What could he be dissatisfied with?

Chihiro knew that no matter how capable someone was, there would also be someone more capable, but he did not wish to become that person, so he wouldn't admire or envy them. The ones who were able to climb to the top were predestined from birth. They possessed certain things from the very start -- like talent, status, or money.

This world was divided into those who *had*, and those who *hadn't*. Decisive differences divided the two. That was the simple truth. Like when he saw the genius, Kiriya Yui, at the dojo.

That girl was on a different level compared to everyone else, and after practice, she would always be all smiles, outgoing, and vivacious, looking as though every day went happily for her. Training wasn't relaxed by any means, but that girl never worked to the point of total collapse or suffered at all,

merely leaving behind a splendid score owed to her innate talent. Yet she was the same as other girls; she enjoyed things outside of karate all the same, and to top it off, she wasn't lacking in the looks department either, and was very popular amongst boys. Simply flawless.

Chihiro hadn't ever thought about wanting to win against her, or having a showdown; he merely acted as though that girl were in a different dimension than he was, and watched her from afar. Even if they seemed to be very close on the exterior and got along well with each other, this was far, far from the case.

Yet one day, all of a sudden, Yui never came to the dojo again. Since their schools were different, they were never able to meet each other again either.

Yet on another day, Yui came back to the dojo, and the two of them began attending the same school.

What fascinating fate.

Be that as it may, Yui hadn't touched karate for several years by then, but he'd heard tell that, compared to before, Yui had become much more conservative. Because of that, Chihiro had thought that she'd probably gone down for the count.

However, Yui had instead become even more dazzling than before.

This had to be cheating. Even in karate, after a while, she rediscovered her sharp intuition.

What you had when you were born into this world decided a vast portion of your life.

Chihiro didn't intend to blame a world like this, nor did he intend to change a world like this.

Because he knew that this was how the world was, and he clearly recognized his own role in it. Different from those idiotic guys who dreamed idiotic dreams and failed idiotically, he was walking the righteous path.

--- That was how Chihiro thought.

"I'm leaving, then."

His father called towards the table and the kitchen, and left the room.

“Okay, take care.” His mother answered.

His younger brother got up without a word and headed for the bathroom. Like usual, he was probably about to spend time styling his hair.

His brother’s plate was still occupied by untouched tomatoes. This was nothing out of the ordinary. His mother should know by now; since his brother wasn’t going to touch them, wouldn’t she just have to *not* put tomatoes into his salad?

A completely normal scene played out in the Uwa household.

But in reality, great changes had taken place.

Thanks to <Heartseed>, the world as Chihiro saw it had changed, because he had changed.

Now, he couldn’t help but admit that, although he boasted that he understood the principles of this world and recognized his own role in it, he’d never given up after all.

Deep down, Chihiro had always been waiting for an opportunity to appear out of the blue, for a lucky chance to drop right into his lap.

He was different from most.

He had the right to become someone who *had*.

He had more value for existing than others.

Now, he had truly become his ideal self.



“Did you guys hear? I think some classes are practicing events for the athletics festival.”

Shimono said on his way back to homeroom after a class in a different room.

“You serious? It’s probably just the second or third years, right?”

This school is unusually passionate about certain matters, after all. --- Chihiro thought as he replied.

“No, I heard there are first years training as well! I heard they were influenced by the second and third years.”

“How ---”

“How could something stupid like that happen?!”

Tada spoke over Chihiro, interrupting from the side, and took the opportunity to snake his arm around Chihiro’s shoulders.

“They’re free to get all fired up for the athletics festival, but no one’s willing to practice specifically for it! We’re losing for sure~, and it’s been so hot and muggy these days~.”

“Get your hands off me if you’re hot, you’re making me hot too.”

Chihiro coolly tried to pull Tada’s hand away as Shimono pointed towards the field.

“Hey guys, look at that.”

There were seven or eight students in uniform, practicing baton passing for relay races.

“Please, there are what, three weeks left? Just how much do they want to win?” Shimono said.

“I mean, all you need to do is start practicing two or three days before.”

Chihiro muttered in assent, and Tada piped up:

“Our class wouldn’t even start practicing the day before, would we?”

“No, even our class... if there’s a miracle... the day before... Nah, it’s impossible.”

“It’s impossible either way!”

Shimono and Tada looked at each other and burst out laughing. Their laughter sounded forced, like it was meant to smooth things over.

Then, Chihiro realized that Enjouji Shino was staring blankly at the field from

afar. She was clutching her textbooks and notebooks and her soft brown hair was ruffled by the wind, but she hadn't adjusted it.

For some reason, for absolutely no special reason at all, Chihiro intentionally slowed his pace, widened the distance between Shimon and Tada walking alongside him, then headed to Enjouji and stopped beside her. Shimon and Tada seemed not to notice him leaving them, and kept moving away.

"What are you looking at, Enjouji?"

"Y-Yes! Ah, Chi, Chii... No! Um, Uwa-kun."

"Hey, when you wanted to say 'Chihiro-kun' and tried to take a hard U-turn once you realized that something was wrong, you ended up saying what Nagase-senpai calls me."

"S... Sorry. Um... Force of habit... by accident."

Enjouji stuttered, hanging her head.

Chihiro sighed:

"Forget it, just call me 'Chihiro-kun' in class. Asking you to change names based on the situation seems a little too hard for you."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that. In the future I'll be careful not to address you wrongly: before opening my mouth I'll first take a deep breath, and after I'm ready, I'll call you 'Uwa-kun'... Wait, I can just call you 'Chihiro-kun'?"

"Did you do that on purpose?"

A conversation like this seemed to have happened before, was this her schtick or something?

"S... Sorry... I d-didn't do it on purpose... Well, ummm... Umm. Ah, you're asking what I'm looking at, right?"

"You still remember what I asked you?"

Enjouji seemed only to react slowly and have a slower processing speed, she really wasn't wrong in the head.

"Um..."

Enjouji looked towards the field again.

“Iori-senpai and Taichi-sen --- *Uhaah!*”

Enjouji tried to point with her finger, but ended up dropping her pencil case and notebook.

Correction: She *was* wrong in the head.

Chihiro looked towards the field. Nagase Iori and Yaegashi Taichi’s figures were visible amongst the group of four boys and four girls. Nagase was holding a relay baton.

They were gathered together and discussing something; someone seemed to say something funny and a couple of them arched backwards in laughter, while some others were doubled over, quaking. Chihiro was out of earshot at this distance, but he seemed to be able to clearly hear their laughter.

Deep down, his heart became restless.

“Those two are... is that Class 2-B?”

Chihiro muttered irrelevant things.

“They’re pretty amazing.”

Enjouji murmured.

“... How?”

Enjouji tilted her head, smiling warmly. She seemed to only want to conceal the expression on her face, but she also seemed to be saying: *You should know...* asking Chihiro to come up with the answer himself.

Chihiro felt irritated.

“Don’t you think they’re awesome?”

“How?”

“How, indeed...?”

Chihiro knew that Enjouji was only glossing over her own remark this time; she seemed to look inexplicably embarrassed.

He looked towards the field again and saw Nagase with her arms outstretched, gesturing as though organizing everyone into a line. Taichi

seemed to say something stupid, causing a tall girl to poke his shoulder.

“Chihiro-kun, you ---”

Enjouji seemed to be overly passionate, failing to breathe properly, and broke off in a strange place.

“What?”

“I was thinking, if it’s you, Chihiro-kun, maybe you’d be able to understand... Um... The...”

She looked up at him, and he stared slightly at her from above. If she had some sort of weird companionship idea about who he was to her, then that would really be a drag.

“N... Noth... ing.”

Enjouji pursed her lips gloomily, her brows drooping dispiritedly, and her eyes taking on a discouraged hue. For some reason, this made Chihiro furious.

Why was he talking to Enjouji in a place like this?

Was there any reason, value, or meaning whatsoever in talking to Enjouji? Watching Taichi and the others was equally meaningless.

The world that Taichi and the others were in, and the world that Enjouji and the others were in --- He would shake off even those borders.

Chihiro stepped away and crossed the courtyard, wanting to return to class early.

“Ah... W-Wait for me, Chihiro-kun!”

Chihiro said nothing and continued forward. Just then, he suddenly bumped into Kiriya Yui and Aoki Yoshifumi alone together. They seemed not to notice him.

He slowed down and perked up his ears. He stood a bit of a distance away, watching both of their profiles. As long as they didn’t turn towards him, Chihiro wouldn’t be seen.

“You broke your promise yesterday.”

Yui was saying angrily. There was no one else around, so her voice carried

over quite clearly.

“Huh? Promise?”

“Are you playing dumb? You... Forget it.”

With that, Yui was about to leave the scene.

“Wait! I don’t get what you mean!”

“What about you, Yui... Although it’s been temporarily paused... your order from back then just came out of nowhere.”

“Order? What do you mean?”

Yui sensed Chihiro looking at her and turned to him. The two of them met eyes; Chihiro nodded in acknowledgement, and then Aoki also realized that he was there.

Somewhat embarrassed, Yui softly raised her hand in greeting, then left. Aoki forced a smile and also raised his hand, then headed off in a different direction.

Something he had caused himself had created an even more intense conflict that he had nothing to do with.

A bizarre feeling, mixed with terror and excitement, filled Chihiro’s heart.

Chihiro was personally experiencing his own new world.

“--- Hey, Chihiro-kun.”

This voice seized his heart in an instant, sending chills throughout his body.

It was obviously Enjouji’s voice, but he felt that her clear, transparent tone might shine upon the entire truth.

Chihiro turned his stiff face towards her.

“Don’t you feel that our senpais... have been a bit weird lately?”

Enjouji peered into Chihiro’s eyes, as though trying to discover some sort of color concealed within.

“Weird, how?”

“I can’t explain it... Should I say that their relationship seems to be strained?...”

“Who knows? Now that you mention it, it does seem that way. Or is it because their emotions are running high due to the athletics festival getting close?”

“Really? It doesn’t seem that way, though... Um, I wonder, could it be...”

Enjouji looked down, showing Chihiro the top of her head.

Just as Chihiro couldn’t bear Enjouji’s vague attitude anymore and was about to leave her there, she looked up. The two of them met gazes, and within Enjouji’s eyes, Chihiro could see soft embers setting torches alight.

“I wonder, could it be ---”

Alarms went off in Chihiro’s head. Instinct told him that he couldn’t allow her to say it.

“I mean, what exactly do you want to do?”

Interrogating her before she could interrogate him, he momentarily evaded the danger before his eyes.

“Huh?... What do... I want to do?”

This question froze Enjouji to the spot.

He wasn’t very clear on what was happening, but this was his chance. If he seized the opportunity and pushed just a little harder, he could tide it over.

“Yeah, what exactly do you want to do?”

“I... Um... I’m...”

The strengthening flames in Enjouji’s eyes completely vanished, becoming a patch of pitch-darkness. She seemed to lose all vitality, and was suddenly in low spirits. Clearly, Chihiro didn’t need to mind these matters any more.

“I’m going back to class first.”

“... Mm.”

Enjouji didn’t follow him from behind again.

That night, Chihiro thought as he lay in bed.

The price that came with earning the power of “Fantasy Projection” was to make those five people more interesting --- <Heartseed> had said that, but Chihiro only felt that it was vague and confusing. According to the information he had received by asking <Heartseed>, if the emotions of those five people were drastically altered, that guy would probably think that it was “quite fascinating”. But this was only a guess, and lacked precise evidence. That guy had said: *About that stuff... I hope you can think about it on your own...*

The simplest and most effective way to disturb those five people’s emotions should be to destroy their seemingly flawless relationships. Before, when <Heartseed> had appeared to inquire about his progress, he had expressed: *Hmm... This shouldn’t be a bad idea...*, and Chihiro had taken it as the correct answer.

Destroy the pentagon of the Cultural Research Club, and wreck the bonds between the five people. Crumble, disappear.

Chihiro would sometimes become scared suddenly, asking himself honestly: was committing such a crime really okay?

However, he always arrived at the same answer.

--- It can’t be helped.

<Heartseed> had promised Chihiro that if Chihiro could brilliantly make those five people more interesting, he would let him use the power of “Fantasy Projection” upon other people outside of those five.

If he could use “Fantasy Projection” on everyone, what sort of glorious achievements could he establish?

Desire murmured, and evil anticipated. He really wasn’t being led along on a leash; he was leading everything himself. That was it. Because he was different from normal humans.

He had to climb higher, he could climb higher, he must climb higher.

They were footstools for him to climb upwards upon. Their friendship wasn’t

an eternal existence anyway, and ultimately they were limited to high school memories. Even if the time of their collapse was shifted slightly earlier, through that, they would be able to recognize the truth. This wasn't anything bad.

The next day at school, Chihiro waited until Inaba was alone, and acted.

“[The person whom Inaba Himeko would never disobey.]”

“Oh, Taichi.”

Even under those conditions, Inaba still mistook Chihiro for Yaegashi Taichi. Although this was within his expectations, it was still blandly unoriginal.

Inaba rushed over, smiling, but within her smile was a slightly visible shadow. It ought to be the influence of Chihiro's recent misdeeds.

“Inaba-san, can we find somewhere we can be alone together?”

Chihiro [Taichi] said.

“A-Alone together... Y-You mean now?”

Inaba's face went red and she looked away. Whenever others were present, Inaba would definitely act as though she were flaunting the love between them, but when she was alone with Taichi... she would instead transform into a bashful girl filled with ladylike feelings.

If one observed this with a detached eye, they would think that Inaba was quite an artificial young lady, but if they too were intoxicated within it, perhaps they might think that she was the cutest girlfriend one could have.

“Yes, right now.”

After hesitating for a bit, Inaba nodded.

And so, Chihiro [Taichi] led Inaba to a room in the club building. It was only half as big as their own clubroom, and its interior was stacked with old desks and bookshelves. Chihiro had already confirmed beforehand that this room was usually unoccupied and could be locked from the inside.

“There's actually a room like this..”

Inaba murmured admiringly. Her figure, dressed in a white long-sleeved top, a skirt, and black knee-highs, looked quite slender and oddly sexy.

Chihiro [Taichi] entered the room after Inaba, and quietly locked the door.

“Well, to what do I owe the pleasure of you specially bringing me here ---”

“Inaba-san, would you please take off your clothes?”

Chihiro [Taichi] asked.

Inaba froze to the spot, as though she could barely fathom the meaning behind those words, and then she flushed red.

“You’re n-n-n-n-not thinking of having our first time here, are you...?!”

She looked around in a panic, waving her hands.

“Um, wait, what, are you suddenly unable to resist or something? E-Erotic manga does have a lot of similar developments...”

Looks like Taichi and Inaba really did have a very pure relationship. Additionally, he hadn’t expected to find out in this fashion that Inaba was a reader of erotic manga.

“I want to see all of you.”

Chihiro tried to inject a tiny bit of passion into it, but his tone accidentally changed along with it; there was clearly no need for that.

“You’re saying that so suddenly... That’s...”

Or rather, in this sort of situation...

“Ah... Y-You only want to see? Y-You only want to see, right?! It would be better for us to choose a more appropriate place for the first time!”

If he wanted to, he should be able to make it to home base, right?

“But... A special setting like this does make me very interested...”

What in the world was she saying?

“Just taking your clothes off will be okay.”

“E-Even if you say that, where do I even begin...”

“For now, please undress to your underwear.”

Chihiro [Taichi] said, thinking that Inaba would never suddenly undress stark naked.

“U-Underwear? A-Are you asking me to undress to my bra and panties?”

“Um... Yes, exactly.”

Inaba had said *bra and panties* with such sincerity that Chihiro [Taichi] nearly burst out laughing.

“I-If I’m still wearing my underwear... in many ways, that shouldn’t count... Okay, w-well... Could you turn around first...?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Although he wasn’t planning to care about this too much, Chihiro couldn’t help but get nervous. He felt that the chance was near zero, but if someone were to try and open the door from outside, things would be far from good.

He could hear Inaba emitting a rustling noise, how much had she taken off?

“Ah... Should I keep my socks on?”

“Pff!”

That attack was much too unexpected, and Chihiro [Taichi] stifled a laugh.

“Huh? Ah, yes, please.”

Chihiro couldn’t help but request, but this was definitely not his preference.

“Although, your tough attitude in suddenly ordering someone to take their clothes off, and your level of perverseness in making them keep their socks on while only having their underwear left, and your exhibitionist tendencies... Only I’m qualified enough to be your girlfriend, good grief.”

Honestly, what the hell was she saying? It was thanks to her overly stupid remark that he was able to calm his mind.

“Ahh, yeah, yeah, we’re really a well-matched couple.”

Chihiro [Taichi] said somewhat dismissively, but as Inaba heard it, it ought to sound like flattery.

Then, the rustling noise of clothing stopped.

“All... All right.”

Inaba murmured in a trembling voice; she had to be extremely nervous.

Chihiro swallowed anxiously; he felt that his body was slowly growing hot... What was he nervous about? This was merely work. He'd never sink to such low-level desires and turn into a dolt. He was different from those vulgar idiots.

Chihiro [Taichi] turned his head --- and inhaled sharply.



The space was drifting with a dusty smell characteristic of old rooms. Stifling heat encircled his body in the private room, where even the window was tightly shut. A slender, black-haired girl was standing in a room like this, as he had demanded, existing only for him. On the girl's body were a black bra, black panties, black knee-highs and loafers, and that was it. Almost her entire body was exposed, with pure-white skin laid bare, stark naked. An unusual figure wearing usual clothes, inside a school, within a sealed space. Sunlight fell in through the window, illuminating the girl's skin, creating a shadow. There was no one else here, only him and the girl. How immoral this was, the sealed room, the secret figure. But it was due to this immorality that she was beautiful, and adorable.

Inaba crossed her hands behind her back, red-faced and looking down.

Chihiro almost thought that he was going to lose track of rationality.

But he would restrain himself.

"What... What do you think?"

"You're beautiful."

Chihiro [Taichi] said, half-truthfully.

A man meeting a woman in underwear face-to-face, what an abnormal space.

This also gave a sense of Taichi and Inaba's abnormal relationship.

In other words, they were a simple, idiotic couple.

"Can... Can I put my clothes back on now?"

Inaba asked, hugging and blocking her chest from view.

"No, not yet."

"You... You want to go even further...?! Do you want me to take my socks off...!?"

Just shut up for a bit --- Chihiro [Taichi] thought, and moved to the next phase.

"Please let me take a few pictures."

Chihiro took out his phone and raised it.

“P-Pictures...?”

The color of fear appeared within Inaba’s eyes. Chihiro had made her deeply believe that he was [Taichi] and had performed many absurd actions recently, but this was the first time she was showing such an emotion.

After so much, has it finally been drawn out?

Despair?

Great despair brought upon her by the person she loved.

“D-Don’t you think pictures... are a little overboard?”

Inaba took a step backwards, her right hand grasping the shirt she had laid on the desk.

She had to be extremely unwilling. Chihiro knew that she would be unwilling, and that was why he was doing it.

“Do you not want me to take pictures, Inaba-san? Do you want to refuse me? Do you not love me? If you’re not willing to love me, Inaba-san, then I have no way of loving you.”

Chihiro made Inaba hear the worst words possible using [Taichi’s] attitude and voice.

Inaba’s eyes gradually filled with the tint of despair. Fear spread throughout her entire body, making her tremble nonstop as gooseflesh erupted across her skin, but Chihiro [Taichi] merely watched it happen.

After a short while, Inaba relaxed her right hand that had been clenched over her shirt.

“... I got it.”

She said, dropping her hands and lowering her head.

“Thanks.”

He now had total control over Inaba.

Chihiro [Taichi] pressed the shutter button. The camera’s flash made Inaba squint irresistibly.

Her naked body was now devoid of that flirtatious feeling prior, and now, in contrast, was charged with a forbidden flavor, enticing one to commit a crime.

Chihiro pressed the shutter button.

Was the phone's camera function able to capture the murky atmosphere Inaba was emitting as well? Right now he could only see the preview before the photo was saved, and was unable to judge that.

Chihiro pressed the shutter button.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

"Please... Please stop!"

Inaba cried loudly. She snatched up the clothing that she had just taken off and hugged it to her chest, then knelt down.

"Um... Next time, take them more slowly... Okay? Let's just stop here... and the pictures you just took... please delete them. ... Please."

Inaba buried her face into the shirt in her hands, her voice slowly turning to sobs.

"I don't... not trust you... but... I'm scared that the photos might get out, and more importantly... this is really weird!"

Inaba stared at Chihiro [Taichi] with reddened eyes, as though pleading with him.

Yes, or no? He had the right to choose.

A line of tears streamed down Inaba's face.

"... I get it, I'll delete the pictures."

Chihiro [Taichi] said. Of course... this was all as planned.

"R-Really? Yeah, makes sense... as long as we talk it out properly, you'll definitely understand, Taichi."

“Of course.”

Inaba looked as though she had exhaled a long breath, and put on her shirt and skirt.

“Deleted. I got rid of all the photos I just took.”

Chihiro [Taichi] let Inaba confirm for herself on his phone screen.

“Ahh... Thank you.”

Chihiro thought it was quite strange to thank him for something like that.



After school, Chihiro’s target changed to Nagase, who was on the road back home. Nagase was walking along a narrow road, with no one nearby. This was a good opportunity. Chihiro rushed up in front of Nagase. He had recently learned that, if he immediately used “Fantasy Projection”, the other person wouldn’t remember it even if they saw him directly. If he had guessed correctly, things would become very interesting --- Chihiro anticipated, believing that the seed he had buried beforehand would have bloomed by now, and chose to declare thusly:

“[Nagase Iori’s most headache-inducing pursuer of the opposite sex.]”

“... Ah.”

Iori’s mouth fell open in astonishment.

She stopped walking, her mouth changing shape nonstop, as though she were trying to say something.

Then...

“If it isn’t Taichi. What’re you doing?”

Nagase Iori thought that Yaegashi Taichi was her most headache-inducing pursuer of the opposite sex.

Interesting. Things seem to be getting interesting, <Heartseed>.

The triangular relationship that had once been concluded was now appearing again.

Of course, things wouldn't make a comeback that easily, but the triangular relationship that had now clearly appeared wouldn't immediately vanish; it would leave traces. These three people could only try to maintain balance in dangerous waters.

As long as one of the angles collapsed, a chain reaction would immediately occur, causing the entire thing to buckle --- Chihiro would sink them into that state.

The triangular relationship that had always been pent up in their hearts needed only a bit of wind to be set alight.

One of them would definitely be unable to bear it, and take action.

He was probably only a step away; he only needed one last push to start an avalanche.

Victory was within reach, and they hadn't even realized that they were under attack by an enemy. This was the absolute difference that formed between those who had and those who hadn't.

"Why aren't you saying anything? This isn't a chance meeting, is it?"

Nagase looked alert as Chihiro [Taichi] spoke to her.

Since things had already progressed this far, he would try to say something definitive.

That would be rather interesting.

"I love you. I only understood after dating Inaba-san that the person whom I really love is you."

This was [Taichi's] confession to Nagase.

A disturbed look crept onto Nagase's face, wavering as though she might break.

Had he succeeded?

Just as Chihiro [Taichi] thought victory was within his grasp --- both of their positions were overturned.

Nagase's eyebrows arched. Her eyes narrowed. Her lips contorted. It was an intimidating, demonic expression.

She closed in on Chihiro [Taichi] in an instant and seized his shirt collar.

"You wanna pick a fight with me? Huh?"

Chihiro could see murderous intent. He even thought that he might actually be killed.

"You trying to betray Inaba Himeko?"

Her voice was very deep.

Hey, what the hell is this? Isn't this a little excessive? Who the hell is she? This is fucking scary. Seriously. She's gonna beat me up. Hell, can't I just shake off her hold? It's not like I'm weaker than she is. But the pressure coming from her is crushing all resistance. How terrifying.

However, he was currently the pursuer who was giving her the biggest headache. This wasn't wrong, and Nagase wasn't fond of refusing others; he was very much aware of this. Don't back down, don't run away, and get through this hurdle.

"What can I do, I love you! I can't do anything to... suppress these feelings!"

Although Nagase had wrapped her hands tightly around his neck mid-sentence, Chihiro still managed to shout the words out.

Her glare, which seemed to pierce right through him, did not ease up.

To break out, Chihiro went all out and put forth his last resort.

"I love you, Nagase-san! I really, really do!"

Had his desperate attitude worked? Nagase released her fist from his collar.

Her eyebrows arched, then deflated, and tears sprang from her eyes.

Before they fell, Nagase looked down, and shoved Chihiro [Taichi] away from her, hard.

“As things are... Don’t you... bring that up again!”

Nagase cried, then tore past Chihiro [Taichi]’s shoulder and ran off as though she were fleeing.

Ahh, did it work?

Nagase had fallen.

Using [Taichi’s] figure, Chihiro had performed several actions on Inaba that made her suspicious, even taking pictures of her in nothing but her underwear. Judging by her despaired expression, her suspicions were probably at their limit.

Taichi was bewildered by Nagase’s temptations, but that seemed to not be enough, so he’d probably just use [Inaba’s] figure to tell Taichi “I hate you”, and then use [Nagase’s] figure to confess to him. That way, his preparations would be complete.

The triangle was on its final leg before being set in motion. But once it began to roll, the pentagon would also be endangered.

The beginning of the end --- was having those three people confront each other.



Sunday came, and today, the story he had created would be entering its final chapter.

Chihiro had utilized “Fantasy Projection” to spin some excuses and promised Taichi, Iori, and Inaba each to meet at the nature park.

At the end of April, the day before he had to pick a club, Chihiro had, for some reason, represented the Cultural Research Club in a marathon organized by the Track and Field club at the nature park; it was there that he had encountered <Heartseed>, in Gotou Ryuuzen’s body.

Chihiro set the meeting place for the three people as the rest area that had

been used for the marathon, then ducked into the shadows of a boulder behind the rest area and held his breath. Not only would he not be discovered here, he could also watch them closely.

<Heartseed>, who always seemed to be watching the Cultural Research Club from somewhere, should also be aware that the end was near. As such, that guy was probably here already.

The first one to arrive at the meeting place was Inaba.

Being the first, Inaba surveyed her surroundings somewhat uneasily. The rest area had a simple roof with a long bench resting underneath, but she didn't sit down, instead standing and waiting.

Then Taichi and Iori arrived at the meeting place.

They were holding hands.

Are you serious? --- Chihiro thought, trying not to laugh. He'd only spoken without thinking, half-jokingly, and he didn't expect them to actually do as he had said. Those two acting according to his plans proved that everything had worked.

Frankly, Chihiro had always been under the impression that a number of factors would be impossible in regards to the direct conflict between those three people today. However, the bonds between Taichi and the others were strong to the point that it made him sick, and this was simultaneously somewhat fortunate for Chihiro, and fatal for Taichi and his friends.

They had to trust each other, so each of them had to trust the other person.

Their words and actions would become truth. To an imposter, there was no situation other than this in which it was easier to trick someone.

Distortions created like this would begin to converge, right here, right now.

And then, what would happen? Opposition? Conflict? Fervor? Separation? Revolt? Or collapse?

If the three of them were to confirm amongst themselves what they had said to each other, they should be able to realize that something was off, but the incidents that had occurred with "Fantasy Projection" wouldn't just vanish

without a trace. If they confirmed with each other which ones of them had been lies, they would still be unable to draw a line between lies and truth.

What would they do? Determine everything that had happened in this time as “lies”? This appeared to be a good idea, but it was actually the worst idea possible. If they saw everything as “lies”, then they would have to suspect whether whoever was in front of them at that very moment was also a “lie”.

Yes. This was the genuinely most terrifying part about “Fantasy Projection”. Even if you noticed that things were off, hell wouldn’t end just there; in fact, it would sink deeper and deeper.

It was as though you were imprisoned within fantasies, not knowing what was true and what was false, everything becoming ambiguous as you lost all traces of the truth. It would be impossible to stay normal forever in that kind of world; no matter how strong your willpower was, sooner or later, you would find it unbearable.

He had heard that they had crossed over many crises, and as such, he wanted to see their skill for himself.

Taichi and Nagase came to Inaba’s side, then dropped their hands.

The three of them became a triangle.

And then...

“““Something is wrong!”””

The three of them pointed at each other.

They had said it in unison, in a manner full of tacit understanding.

And as though they were synchronized...

“Because you looked exactly the same.” Nagase said.

“So I thought you ought to be real.” Inaba said.

“It actually affected me, too.” Taichi said.

“““--- But there’s no way you guys would say something like that!”””

After this declaration, Taichi, Iori, and Inaba stared each other in the face, and burst out laughing: *Ah ha ha ha ha*.

“By the way, why were you guys holding hands?” Inaba asked.

“Because Nagase told me to do it no matter what...”

“Because Taichi told me to do it no matter what...”

““Huh?””

Taichi and Nagase realized that they had spoken over each other, and the two of them laughed again.

“What’s up with you guys? I’m... No, let’s sort out the situation first.”

Inaba suggested, and the other two replied:

“Okay.”

“All~ right!”

Much too peaceful.

Much too friendly.

As though it were no different from normal.

And this made it much too supernatural.

Chihiro was dumbfounded, doubtful of whether the developments happening before his eyes were real. Was this actually an illusion? At the very least, they had to have overly suspicious attitudes, or show some apprehension while talking, right?

He kept watching them closely; clearly they *had* been disturbed.

Why? Because they thought that, since all of the situations had occurred when two of them were alone together, they would be okay as long as they stuck together as three? Or was this the power of those three, of the Cultural Research Club uniting together?

The three of them confirmed whether the recent events were real.

“--- and that’s what happened.”

Taichi finished, and Nagase yelled in surprise:

“How could I say something like that?! There’s no way I’d get involved between Inaban and Taichi!”

Then it was Inaba’s turn to inquire:

“Then, Taichi, after school the other day... about you telling me that you hated me...”

“Huh? How could I say that I hate you?! I’m... to Inaba... um...”

“How can you hesitate now, Taichi-kun?!”

“I-I get it, don’t *hit* me, Nagase! Um... That is... I love you.”

“T-Taichi~. ≡”

“Hey, d-d-don’t hug me here!”

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

“Nagase, don’t fan the fire like an elementary school student!”

Chihiro was livid. He was violently wrenching weeds out of the ground, aggrieved.

What the *fuck* were these people doing? They had no sense of danger whatsoever.

“Does this mean that our imposter can appear at any time? Or can we be spontaneously controlled?”

Inaba responded to Nagase:

“An imposter... if that were true, then could one of us be an imposter right now?...”

Yes, that’s it! Have you finally figured out just how dangerous a situation you’re trapped in?

“But all of us here, right now, are the real things.”

Taichi said unhesitatingly.

“Yeah.”

“Yup!”

Inaba and Nagase nodded in agreement, smiling.

They didn’t collapse. They looked so weak when they were by themselves, and had fallen for it so easily, creating a disturbance.

But there were still many opportunities to set them up, and he could repeat this endlessly. Even if he were discovered to be the imposter, as long as he could add lie upon lie to the pile of lies, and force them into an impasse...

But even Inaba, who had shed tears over this, was now saying impressively:

“Even if there’s an imposter, it doesn’t mean that our real selves will disappear. We just need to thoroughly understand that. No matter how many imposters appear, we only need to trust that the real things will come back, and keep enduring until it’s over.”

Nagase added:

“Because the versions of everyone in our hearts are absolute! But I, with my harshest mood swings and knack for making everyone feel chaotic, don’t seem to have the right to say that!”

“You’re right.”

Inaba’s roast cracked everyone up.

Chihiro furiously pulled up grass, pulling it up nonstop, roots and all, his body drenched in sweat.

What the shit, man. They aren’t disturbed at all.

Chihiro thought he had won, but... had he really suffered crushing defeat instead?

Even if he himself had superhuman power, were they really the ones who ---
had?

After those three had returned home, Chihiro remained in the same spot, against the boulder, unable to move.

What should he do... If this wasn't enough to disturb them, things wouldn't be come more interesting. What should he do?

Chihiro had absolutely no one to turn to for help.

Then, suddenly ---

<Heartseed>, in the body of Yamaboshi High School physics teacher Gotou Ryuuzen, appeared.

Chihiro thought that his heart would come falling out of his mouth.

"What the... Where the hell did you come from?"

"Where the hell did I come from... I just walked here like normal... It was just that you were staring blankly, Uwa-san, and didn't notice me... Ahh... but that is irrelevant."

His rubbish-filled way of speaking hadn't changed at all; his habit of only picking Gotou to appear as was also the same.

The root of the cause that had twisted him into an abnormal world was standing before his eyes.

Chihiro was very thankful that he had been given power, but he was unable to resist his instinctive, disgusted feeling.

"So... ahh... right."

>Heartseed's< manner of speaking made it sound like he had forgotten his purpose for appearing.

"Things don't seem to be going too well."

Within his viscous tone, traces of a highly overpowering atmosphere could be

detected.

Chihiro swallowed nervously, then spoke:

“That's because ---”

“Shouldn't you have been able to make it more interesting?”

Blame.

The blood inside Chihiro's body froze.

“... I hope that, once you join my side, you drop the idea that you can safely return to the original world if you only show me boring things... Just kidding.”

Threat.

Terror slowly engulfed his entire body.

He was going to be eaten. He couldn't stand still without support.

“... You seem to have some misgivings. Are you acting in earnest? Hey... Uwasan?”

He might have opened a door that couldn't be closed again.

Translator's Notes:

[\[1\]](#) 3 individual rooms along with a room for Dining, Living, and Kitchen. Japanese housing term.

Chapter 5: And The Pentagon Dissolved From Then On

Month: O

Day: X

Clear

It can't be Chihiro-kun who's behind all the trouble, can it?

How could... that happen.

What the heck, I wrote something weird. It's not that it's already over; it never happened in the first place.

My senpais, who have always seemed off to me lately, seem to be cheering up now, which makes me really happy. They're obviously going through quite a lot of trouble, yet they keep being concerned about how I am.

Have you seen anything strange lately? Has there been anyone acting weirdly around you? They've been asking a lot of questions, but I just can't think of anything, so I've been telling them: "Everything's fine."

As my senpais cheer up, Chihiro-kun's actually seeming to get gloomier and gloomier. He seems to be afraid of something, and he seems to be really on edge lately, so I've been avoiding him.

Can it actually be him...

... No way, right?

Even in the one-in-a-zillion possibility that I'm right, I can't do anything anyway.

It's not like I do *nothing*. I have tried to challenge myself, but it's no use.

So the results are the same. No matter whether I know, or don't know, I can't do anything either way. I can only watch from the side, as a bystander.

Today I stayed in the same position, like I always do.

+++

On Monday, the five second-years of the Cultural Research Club met in the clubroom early, for fear that the bizarre phenomenon created by <Heartseed> would happen again. Yaegashi Taichi had also come to attend this meeting,

which was led by Nagase. How many times have meetings like this occurred?

The five of them first reported to each other anything weird they'd noticed lately, and discovered that whoever instigated the actions had no memory of doing so, yet the other four did. If that were the only thing that was happening, then it was likely that Taichi and the others were being controlled by someone; but no holes existed in their memories, and after they each confirmed each others' alibis for not being at the scene, they seemed to be able to speculate that "an imposter who looks exactly like them is making contact with the other four members of the Cultural Research Club from an unknown area". Although someone suggested that "their memories were simply being modified", they eventually eliminated this possibility.

"No matter the situation, all of them involved the person meeting us one-on-one, and this could be a restriction."

Inaba said, temporarily setting down the chalk in her hand.

Kiriyama let out a *Mmmhh~* moan, and then murmured:

"But the four imposters I bumped into were exactly like the real things. Although the things they said were really weird, no matter how I look at it, they were real."

"From my position, I hope that Taichi can use the power of love to see through the fake Inaban!"

Nagase said on her own initiative. Beside her, Aoki hugged his head: "Ah! That means the power of love between us won't work!" But Kiriyama interrogated him: "What do you mean, *us*? Who exactly are you using as a participant in that two-person example?!"

"Even if you say that, Nagase, she was exactly the same as Inaba in terms of appearance and smell..."

"S-Smell? Do I have a very strong smell?"

Having been majestically directing the scene seconds ago, Inaba suddenly turned frantic.

"Uh, no, not that, by smell, I mean... a very nice smell."

"Ewwwwwww!"

Nagase screeched loudly.

"R-Really? I smell nice to Taichi... I really hope I can start smelling a bit like Taichi too. Heh heh~."

"Leeewwwwd!"

Nagase screeched loudly once more. Come to think of it, did that sentence count as "lewd"?

"Forget about that, let's come up with a strategy first."

Kiriyama's call to action caused everyone to begin thinking of a way to deal with the present phenomenon.

If one were to count, this was the fifth strange phenomenon to happen, and they had all gotten used to this sort of development, and grown quite a bit too, so their discussion went very smoothly.

"Since they only happen during one-on-one sessions, all we need to do is keep our guard up when we're alone together, right?"

"The simplest way is to avoid one-on-one situations~, but we can't declare that as absolutely safe, can we~?"

"Ah... If we follow that, then won't that mean I can't be alone with Taichi for a while?"

"Huh? Well, on the other hand, when we're on the move we should just stay together in threes, right?"

"If that's the case, even with three people, I'll still be able to be with Taichi a lot. ≡"

"I support this too, Inaba! That way... since I've had fewer opportunities to be with Yui lately, now I'll have more time to interact with her..."

"I-Inaba, um... that would make me happy, but wouldn't it be too difficult? If we try to stick together like that, then won't the situations with two people alone together increase with it?"

"We just need to step over difficulties like that—"

"Listen up, Inaban! Seal away 'Dereban' for now! That's an order!"

"G-Got it, I just need to think hard, right? Let me think... Ah, come to think of it, when that imposter is impersonating someone, will they have that person's memories too? Maybe we could ask a question that only the real thing would know the answer to, and if they don't, we'll know they're fake."

"Memories... I see. Well, how about we come up with a password that only we will know?"

"Are we using a password? Good idea, Iori, it's worth a try. But everything that guy has done is all according to conditions he's set, so it seems pretty difficult if we try to immediately solve the problem with that method."

"Ah! Chihiro-kun and Shino-chan should still be fine, right? I haven't seen the imposter as either of them yet, so I feel that they haven't been twisted into this."

"Makes sense. I'll casually find out when talking to them."

"No matter what, if only the five of us have imposters, we only have to confirm again with each other at a different time, and that would solve the majority of our problems."

"We can't be sure yet that we're the only five with imposters, Taichi."

Hearing Inaba say this, Kiriyama looked somewhat uneasy.

"There might be other imposters for people who are not us? I-Isn't that really scary? The friends I've been talking to lately could be imposters too..."

Nagase added:

"Yeah... If it's only our problem, then we can deal with it, but if it involves everyone else, then that's not good. One slip-up could mean the end of being certain about anything."

"Although I was the one who suggested this, there might not necessarily be any imposters outside of us five. Or should I say, we don't even know what kind of motive these imposters are acting upon. Are they autonomous puppets created by <Heartseed>? Or are they simply illusions created by <Heartseed> for us to see?... But, no matter what, we only need to do one thing."

Inaba said, prompting Kiriyaama to ask:

"What?"

Inaba carefully looked at the other members; Taichi looked at everyone along with her, and then everyone else followed suit.

The five-person pentagon in the Cultural Research Club clubroom each looked at each other's faces.

Then, Inaba spoke:

"Trust."

Trust.

"Situations like this make it very difficult for one to not remain suspicious, but we have to believe in the people and friends whom we trust. I'm not saying that you have to believe what the other person says, you understand?"

Everyone nodded.

"Trust the other person, and then take action."

Everyone understood what Inaba meant by that.

"No matter how you look at it, this is really headache-inducing."

Inaba said with a smile, shaking her head.

"The fact that <Heartseed> keeps picking fights with us, strong as we are."



"That means that you guys haven't forgotten about our gamble during the athletics festival, right? Whoever wins gets to make a demand~."

Nagase said, looking very upbeat.

Since their after-school cheer competition practice times overlapped, Taichi, Nagase, and Inaba were standing next to each other and chatting.

"Well... one of the teams out of all three grades is really..."

Inaba muttered somewhat resentfully, prompting Taichi to ask:

"Did something happen?"

"Our class is really pumped, and the third years are okay... But the first years aren't showing any enthusiasm at all. Their atmosphere is done for."

"Even with Chihhi and Shino-chan?"

"How would they have so much influence? Chihiro, especially, is just terrible at it; he's clearly the cheer competition rep, but he doesn't plan to seriously practice at all. Does he think his lazy attitude is cool or something? *Tsk!*"

Inaba cursed, and Taichi consoled her:

"Don't say that, he really only lost at *jankenpon*, after all."

"Anyway, the green team needs to think of a way to get the first years pumped, but they don't change at all no matter how we second years try to reason with them... Ah, we're assembling now? See you."

Inaba said, and tore back to her own class's assembly point.

"Hmm~, Inaban's changed. She was a bit reserved in our first year, and although she would do some stuff behind the scenes, she'd never stand out and lead the charge in class."

Nagase watched Inaba from behind, her eyes narrowing. Her warm gaze resembled that of a parent watching their child.

"In that case, you've changed too, right, Nagase? You didn't like to be a rep or whatever during first year, and I feel like you preferred to act on your own more."

"Then you're the same way, Taichi. Taichi... although you inherently like taking on other people's business, I didn't have an impression that you liked to fight on the front lines before."

Really? Taichi thought, scratching his head.

"Yeah, that means we've all changed!"

Nagase concluded, placing a perfect full stop on that subject.

Today involved a full practice of the entire cheer competition, so the three year levels belonging to the red team were gathered together. Some people were absent due to club or committee activities, but the sight of nearly 100 people gathered together was something to behold.

Taichi and the cheer competition reps from the other years directed this scene.

However —

"Um, the people in this area..."

"Setouchi-senpai! Could you come here for a second?"

"I'll be right there, hold on a second! Yaegashi-kun, can I leave this to you?"

"I-I need to direct them? I don't feel very good about that..."

Many reps were absent for reasons outside of their control, and there was a very clear lack of people capable of leading and directing.

"L-Let's take a short break! And second year reps, meet here!"

Setouchi shouted. The second year reps gathered up.

"What now? We don't have enough people, especially first and third years..."

Setouchi said, her face anxious.

"Let's just give all the second years to one person, and the rest of us will help the other years?" Nagase suggested.

"That would be good... but who can direct the entire second year?..."

Taichi thought that too — but a certain person's shadow suddenly flitted through his mind.

"No, if it were Fujishima..."

He had seen what a resurrected Fujishima looked like. Now that he thought about it, there had been something off about her, so it had probably been an imposter created by the phenomenon Taichi and his friends were facing right now. But when Fujishima was still their class president, she had definitely exuded the crushing atmosphere of a leader.

"Huh? M-Me? I can't... just with my abilities..."

Fujishima shook her head, already utterly devoid of confidence.

But in this sort of situation, other than the Fujishima of the past, they really could not think of anyone else who was capable of directing practice for multiple groups at once.

"Ah~, in order for our class to win, we need Fujishima-san's strength~."

Watase Shingo said, as though he were talking loudly to himself, and then Nagase added: "Yup! I mean~, as long as Fujishima-san brings out the big guns, we can definitely do it~!"

As Watase and Nagase riled up the mood, everyone else seemed to understand their intention.

"Only Fujishima-san is qualified enough~."

"Yeah, I don't know if Fujishima-san is willing to help or not~."

"It would be great if we had Fujishima-san's strength~."

"My... strength?"

"Huh? What's up, Fujishima-san?"

"That doesn't matter, idiot, just cheer her on."

"Go, Fujishima-san!"

"Go get 'em, Fujishima!"

For some reason, other people began to go with the flow, cheering Fujishima on despite having nothing to do with this at all.

What on earth was with this wave of noise? He had only mentioned it offhandedly. Taichi was a bit anxious, wondering whether Class 2-B might be a little too excited.

""Fujishima! Fujishima! Fujishima!""

Under this tempest, enthusiastic cheering for Fujishima came very naturally, gradually expanding and increasing in scale. Watching the second years calling for Fujishima, even the first and third years ran over to join the fight for some

reason. The r-red team is way too enthusiastic about this!

Bathed from head to toe in cheers, Fujishima stood blankly where she was. She trembled, then clenched her fists tightly, pushed her glasses up, lifted her head, threw her chest out, and stood majestically.

And then, she finally —

"Heh heh heh... HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"... Where did this demon come from?"

Taichi teased surreptitiously. He had a premonition that Fujishima was probably turning over a new leaf once again.

"Since you guys need me so much, there's no way I can refuse! Directing the ignorant masses, is it? All right, I'll show you all what I'm made of!"

Where exactly did this demon come from?

"T-That was great, Fujishima-san!"

"Watase, I've suspected it for the longest time, and it turns out that you are a total masochist. You love Fujishima's queenly character, don't you?" Taichi murmured.

By the way, Fujishima's demon mode was automatically disabled after that day's practice.



Taichi started home immediately after the full cheer competition practice had concluded.

Quite a long time had passed before they had noticed the start of the phenomenon according to their speculation, but <Heartseed> had been nowhere to be found.

Was this a coincidence? Or was it not <Heartseed> this time, but <Number 2>, who had initiated the [Time Regression] phenomenon?

What was worrying was that <Number 2> had once possessed his little sister for a while. Taichi was very uneasy; was it possible that such a nightmare would happen again?

"Huh? Did something happen recently?"

Hearing Taichi's inquiry, his little sister, now in sixth grade of elementary school, widened her round eyes even further and looked up from her magazine. She had let her slightly curled hair grow to where it barely touched her shoulders, and it naturally created a mature charm that made it hard to believe that she was a sixth grade elementary student. This was Taichi's little sister, whom he was very proud of and could very confidently introduce to anyone (although he currently had no plans to introduce her to anyone, of course).

"I'm still thinking of why you ran home so frantically, Onii-chan, and suddenly asked me that sort of question... Ah, y-you haven't found out, have you?"

"Y-Yes! That's it! Tell me about that, now!"

Taichi prodded her, thinking that he should know first about any abnormal changes that his sister had noticed.

"Hmm~, I keep thinking that you'll drop dead after finding out, so I never told you, but I can't do anything if you've seen through me."

Drop dead? What on earth was happening? Taichi had no idea at all.

"Actually, I've~..."

Keeping him on tenterhooks, his sister giggled, then set off an explosion.

"Got a boyfriend!"

... Boyfriend.

..... Boyfriend.

..... Got a boyfriend.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!"

Taichi fainted on the spot.

"Onii-chan, are you okay?! You didn't use an ukemi falling technique at all!? Your head crashed into the ground with a bang!"

"Wha-Wha-Wha-What..... B-B-B-Boyfriend....."

"Y-You sound like a robot, Onii-chan! Pull yourself together! Hey!"

His consciousness was slowly fading... On the other side of his muddled vision, he could see his little sister's frantic face... He also heard *whap whap* sounds, and his cheeks hurt... His sister was slapping him... Ah!

Coming to his senses, Taichi sat up violently. That was close, he almost died.

"Boyfriend... You actually got a boyfriend! It's too early! You're a sixth grader in elementary school! As your brother, I... I don't remember allowing you to have a boyfriend!"

"Huh~, I waited until you got a girlfriend before I got a boyfriend, Onii-chan."

"What...! It's because I got a girlfriend...! If that's the case, then if I didn't have a girlfriend..."

"Then do you want to break up with your girlfriend? Oniiii-chan."

"... I, I'm not going to break up with her."

"Until when?"

"... F-Forever."

Taichi said, resisting the embarrassment. His sister giggled "Nyeheh~", then squatted down and stared straight into Taichi's eyes as he sat on the floorboards.

"Good grief~, Onii-chan's lovesick too~. Since you have someone so important to you, then you can understand why I want to start dating too, right?"

"Well... I still feel that it's too early for you... No, kids grow into adults this way... and you've grown up too... It's a bit early, but... if you want to, then whatever makes you happy."

Taichi swallowed his tears, and his sister pounced, hugging him.

"Yay~! I love you, Onii-chan~! Let's do a double date next time, Onii-chan! ≡"

"I-I'm really happy... but I wanna cry...!"

Taichi shed tears of blood.

- By the way, is your boyfriend the same age as you?
- He's three years older than me, he's in third year of middle school.
- Wha...! Y-You should break up with that lolicon bastard right now!
- You're one to talk, you siscon Onii-chan...

+++

They had already completely uncovered the fact that some phenomenon was happening.

Coming to this realization, Chihiro violently flung the tape recorder aside. It had been a tool he had planted in and just recovered from the Cultural Research Club.

He was in one of the empty rooms in the club building, the very room where he had made Inaba strip down to her underwear. He sat straight onto the floorboards, not pulling up a chair.

They had already discovered that [Fantasy Projection] could virtually only be used in one-on-one situations. Chihiro hadn't even used it that many times, but they had also mentioned the possibility of there being an imposter other than themselves.

What was worse was the fact that they were planning to use memories to tell apart the imposter and the real deal. Frankly, if they were to do that, then he would be utterly helpless, and would... No, he didn't need to think about that, what use was there in worrying about a future that wouldn't come? He had only learned about this because he had planted the listening device in the clubroom in order to make it a foolproof plan, right? Everything was under control.

But Chihiro finally knew why everyone trusted that idiotic girl who was blinded by love. Sharp leadership and the ability to analyze information, along with a dignified mien, made her the mental backbone for most, and this was indeed deserving of praise. Inaba Himeko was an existence not to be

underestimated.

He couldn't blow off any of the others either. Chihiro knew that they had crossed many troublesome phenomena like this together, but their calm attitude towards abnormal situations was much too abnormal in itself. There clearly was an abnormal phenomenon going on, yet their attitude seemed to be saying that the Athletics Festival was pretty important. What the fuck? That's insane.

They were a bunch of abnormals. The world that they were able to strut in was also an abnormal world.

He was the normal one, right?

He'd simply been too careless back then. He could be sure of the fact that he was not in the same world as them, that he was on a higher plane than them. Moreover, absolutely no one had realized that Chihiro was the one using [Fantasy Projection].

Trust the other person, and then take action — Really?

That was the strategy to deal with [Fantasy Projection] that Inaba had told everyone. What a load of baloney.

What use was there in trusting the other person? None whatsoever.

Would miracles happen when trusting the other person? Of course they wouldn't.

No matter when, this world was always betraying people, always covetously eyeing the next opportunity to betray them.

That was how the world worked.

He was going to use [Fantasy Projection] more frequently. He didn't care whether he was turning into one of those five, or someone else. He'd surround them with imposters, rendering them unable to discern between real or fake. Render them unable to trust anyone in this world ever again.

Since they were underestimating him, he would not let things end so easily. He would show them what hell was.

After school, Chihiro approached Yui, who was preparing to leave school and head for the dojo. She had stayed in the clubroom for a bit, so there wasn't anyone else currently near the shoe racks.

"[Aoki Yoshifumi as seen by KiriYama Yui]."

Chihiro decided to use Aoki.

"Are you going back too? Yui-san."

"Yup, are you heading to the club now, Aoki?"

For the sake of his own future, he could not fail the conversation that was to follow. He couldn't, he wouldn't fail.

"Yeah... Well, now, when two people are alone together, we need to have our guard up, right? Ah, let me confirm first, our password is..."

Chihiro [Aoki] launched a preemptive strike.

"The password is *Smash <Heartseed>!*... Hey, that password's too violent, isn't it? Want to change it to another one?"

"It's pretty good already, simple and easy to understand."

Chihiro [Aoki] said, causing Yui to crossly murmur "You really think so?"

With that, Yui would be under the impression that Aoki was standing right in front of her. He should make his move now. Even if he were recognized as the imposter, that wouldn't be bad. That way he'd teach them a lesson, and make them realize that a password was utterly meaningless.

Attack as boldly as possible. — Hit her? Might be overkill.

"Yui-san."

Chihiro [Aoki] called her name, then reached out to her.

Yui stared at his hand in alarm. What was she alarmed about?

Chihiro [Aoki] reached forward, and Yui stared unswervingly at the movement of his hand.

Petite as she was, Yui had a tiny face. Her cheeks were fair and looked very soft. His hand slowly approached. The whole thing felt odd. For some reason, his hand began to tremble, but Chihiro [Aoki] shoved back his surfacing discomfort and touched Yui's cheek.

His finger stuck to Yui's cheek like it were being attracted there, and a numbing sensation scuttled through his entire body. Her cheek was unexpectedly ice-cold and felt very comfortable.

"... What are you doing?"

Yui asked, motionlessly staring at Chihiro [Aoki]'s eyes.

"Um... I think you're really cute..."

"In other words, you touched me because you wanted to touch me?"

Yui was neither embarrassed nor angry; rather, her face was devoid of emotion. This bewildered Chihiro [Aoki].

"Um... Yes."

In an instant, Yui's eyes flashed a penetrating, powerful gleam.

"The real Aoki would never do something like this! Begone, you imposter!"

"Pff?!"

As an impact shot up his crotch, excruciating pain pierced his body.

He felt himself becoming weak. His body shook back and forth, losing balance. Tears sprang from his eyes, and nausea ran rampant inside him.

Chihiro [Aoki] collapsed on the spot.

"Ow... OWWW... OUCH...! Hey... Kicking me so hard in the nuts... that's going too... far..."

"You've no right to talk, imposter. Oh, I should capture you while I still can. That way we can resolve everything. Hmm, where's the rope..."

"Huh—?"

— Capture you while I still can?

What? Hey, what? Hey, what's this? What? What? What what what what?

Fuck. Fuck. This is bad. It's over it's over it's over. Sweat was pouring from his body.

Play dumb? Won't work. The instant she gets in contact with someone, it's over. If someone other than her gets here, they're going to be able to clearly see Uwa Chihiro lying on the ground.

It's over.

Is he going to meet his end here so easily, like a mere trifle? Is he going to die?

No.

No, nononono. A failure. A dropout. If everything is seen through, he wouldn't be able to stay at the same school at all, and would become a social outcast. No, maybe because of <Heartseed>, he might even become a world outcast—?

His vision blurred. What to do? He should just admit that he's an imposter, and then— Right. <Heartseed> once told him that, to them, there was nothing that <Heartseed> could not do. He'll exploit that.

"Even if I've been caught... that's fine... I'll just vanish now."

Was that okay? He wasn't digging his own grave, was he?"

"Vanish... I see. Then this wasn't much use, was it?"

Ahh... it worked. What a narrow escape. He survived.

"Hmm, but no matter where I look or how I look at you, you look like the real thing."

Yui was carefully inspecting Chihiro [Aoki].

Why was she so calm even after seeing an imposter? What was with this calm attitude like she were looking at a bug? Yui watched Chihiro [Aoki] from above as he was sprawled on the floorboards. Don't look at me like that.

In desperation, Chihiro [Aoki] opened his mouth:

"Why... don't you think I'm the real thing?"

"Because Aoki would never touch me like that just because of his own desires."

Yui answered matter-of-factly. In her reply, he could see overwhelming trust.

Trust... The fuck is that, huh? Don't act like you all know each other so well.

"You seem unusually calm. I'll be leaving first, then. If you've got a problem, bring it on anytime."

Yui grinned confidently, her long chestnut hair billowing.

"Oh, I should tell everyone that the imposter can store memories, so a password is useless."

Then, as though she were completely disinterested in Chihiro [Aoki], Yui left the scene. Sprawled facedown on the ground, Chihiro saw quick, light footsteps entering his blurred vision.

"Wah!"

A student arrived in front of the shoe racks, looking startled.

"What're you looking at?"

Chihiro stood up, holding onto the shoe racks for support, only to see that the student had run off, scared.

He had narrowly avoided danger. By the looks of it, they shouldn't have realized the loophole that he actually [didn't have their memories]. He had completed his goal. But.

"FUCK!"

Chihiro slammed the metal shoe rack, hard. It let out a rumbling bang, and the noise echoed around him. Stinging pain traveled up his wrist. He was trapped in a sense of emptiness and failure.

He'd been exposed in such an unsightly manner. He'd been underestimated. He was forced to see it. The trust between them. Yui completely disregarding him.

The distance between him and KiriYama Yui was so very overwhelming. She was so very out of reach.

Things were not going well at all.

The next day at school, Chihiro ran into Taichi by chance. Taichi was walking into school.

Hit him — Chihiro thought on instinct. His mind had been so restless that he had been unable to sleep last night, and a mysterious excitement was gushing inside him. Although he'd always been avoiding crowds before taking action, now it didn't matter.

"[Someone among Yaegashi Taichi's friends who usually arrives very late.]"

Despite feeling exhilarated, he was still able to keep his cool. Chihiro couldn't help but admire himself.

If an irresolvable paradox were to be created with [Fantasy Projection], the results would be catastrophic. For example, when Chihiro was using [Fantasy Projection], if the person he was impersonating were to appear, it would seem that two of the same person were simultaneously there; very clearly an irresolvable paradox. To avoid violating this rule, Chihiro would carefully control the conditions.

His mind was very clear today, and he was feeling great. This was his original form. There was no way he would lose.

"Oh, Watase. You're really early today. How rare."

"Good morning, Taichi-san."

Other than the sound of his own voice, he could also hear his voice after it was automatically converted. At first he thought it was utterly gross, but now he was quite accustomed to it. Judging by the voice, he learned that Watase was a guy.

"Taichi-san, this might seem very sudden, but could I please borrow some money?"

It was a bit low, but this should be the territory that was easiest to understand, and the most corruptible.

Money represented humanity's desire.

"Sure, how much?"

"However much you can; no matter what, I need some cash."

Chihiro [Watase] bowed his head in request.

Taichi was a goody-two-shoes. Just from that, he might give Chihiro all of the money he had on him.

"Got it."

See? What an idiot.

"As for what you're using it for... Well, you don't have to tell me. But when will you pay me back?"

"At a later date."

How gullible, how... gullible?

Taichi glared at Chihiro [Watase] sharply.

Unable to withstand the pressure, Chihiro [Watase] automatically took a step backwards.

"W-What's up?"

"You're an imposter, aren't you?"

"Uh... No, why..."

"Watase is super annoying about borrowing money; he writes an I-O-U and stamps it even for very small amounts! It's in his grandpa's will!"

"Wha... What?!"

What the hell kind of setup is that?! Who could possibly know that?!

Chihiro [Watase] yelled inwardly, simultaneously spinning around and taking off. Retreat for now.

He ran behind the school building. Upperclassmen and students just finishing morning practice looked at him, amazed. Chihiro's face grew hot, and nausea rose up in his chest. No, he didn't lose this time, that was only a tactical retreat.

But to those bystanders, right now, he was a downright deserter.

Did Taichi realize that he was unable to copy other people's memories because of that? He didn't know, fuck!

Things were not going well at all, things were not going well at all.

All throughout class that day, Chihiro was ruminating over his next attack. He even skipped club to prepare for battle, and before he knew it, it was evening.

Chihiro decided to attack Aoki after school.

"[A member of Aoki Yoshifumi's family who can show up here without it seeming strange.]"

"Ah, Nee-chan, are you heading home right now?" Aoki said.

Aoki has a sister? It took him slightly aback, but Chihiro [Aoki's Sister] continued to approach him silently.

He wanted to use an invulnerable, perfect, and cruel execution method to properly teach this guy a lesson.

"Huh? What?"

Chihiro [Aoki's Sister] grinned, and clenched his fists.

He swung his right fist at that stupid, totally unalarmed face in front of him.

Once.

Twice.

"Ow?!"

Aoki staggered backwards after taking blows right to the face.

Chihiro began to tremble with excitement; a rush shot down his spine. He was watching himself suppressing his opponent, and a savage, violent impulse delivered anaesthetic to his brain. He wanted badly to smash, to destroy, to beat the shit out of this guy with his animal instinct — but Chihiro would not do that. He knew the meaning of self-control, and he would show mercy, because he really had no intention of torturing his opponent's physical body.

“W-What are you doing, Nee-chan?!”

Chihiro [Aoki's Sister] said nothing, tilting his head.

“Ah..... the imposter...”

Hearing Aoki mumble that, Chihiro [Aoki's Sister] lifted the corners of his mouth and grinned.

“You imposter... Actually using my sister's... form like that!”

Scream with fury. Rage. Go insane. If you want to, by all means come at me. Bring it on. When the time came, he would thoroughly return the favor.

Then you will discover the reality that you have already been dragged into hell.

“Hey, wait... Doesn't... this mean that we don't know who will attack us at any time...?”

Has the idiot realized it too?

As long as he used [Fantasy Projection], Chihiro could become anyone he wanted. Even if they were able to see through his disguise after a conversation with him, at a glance they were still unable to tell. In other words, all of humanity could attack him. Who could live in that kind of world? Their mind wouldn't be able to take it. Chihiro was going to identify the instant they broke, then move in and make things more [interesting].

What sort of despaired expression was Aoki going to make? Chihiro literally could not wait.

“What the hell, nothing to be worried about.”

Dazzling light illuminated Aoki's face.

Aoki laughed.

He was laughing at him.

“What... did you say?...”

“Because if you're acting like this, doesn't that mean you've already admitted defeat?”

“Hah?”

“After all, <Heartseed> and... <Number 2> too, I think. Those guys would drag us into really cruel situations, but they would never make random moves afterwards. That was how they always worked. But, to be fair, during the [Personality Exchange], <Heartseed> did intervene once.”

Aoki wasn't especially emotionally moved or excited; he was talking in a normal tone.

“I don't really understand it, but according to Inaba, those guys seem to be observing the [fluctuations in our hearts], or they seem to be [interested in five-people groups], or something. In other words, these inexplicable happenings are a sort of competition. If those guys can collapse our bonds and spirits with these various phenomena, then they've won. If we can endure and cross over these obstacles, then we win.”

Aoki nodded, agreeing with his own words.

“If you actually intervene, not figuratively or hypothetically, in this sort of competition... How do I put it? It's like you're fouling or forfeiting.”

“Uh... I don't recall competing against you people.”

Aoki was actually forcibly pressing these strange rules onto him, and then declaring that he lost? Quit joking around.

“Nope, you've lost. That said, you really aren't <Heartseed>, are you? Does that make things different?”

Aoki began miring himself over it, but immediately said “I'll talk to everyone else about it next time”.

“Anyway, what I want to say is, we'd never lose to someone like you who will intervene just because he's in a tight spot. Also, you can act against me, but if you try it on a girl... that's unforgivable.”

“Unforgivable... What're you gonna do to me?”

“Unforgivable. Anyway, it's unforgivable. That's it!”

There's no way that Aoki had thought this through at all. It was baseless. He's bluffing.

He was clearly bluffing, so why did Chihiro feel overwhelmed? Why did he feel like he couldn't win against them?

He was the strong one, and those guys were the weak ones. Two different positions. Why would it be the other way around? Foul? Forfeit? Defeat? Quit joking around. He had the upper hand, he had the upper hand, he had the upper hand; he had not lost, he had not lost, he had not lost, he had not lost.

No matter what angle he looked at it from, no matter what time he looked at it from, no matter how he looked at it, he had the upper hand. Anyone could understand that, right? Someone come and help judge that statement in court. Anyone. Anyone at all. But she cared for — Things were not going well at all, things were not going well at all, things were not going well at all.

The world did not want to stand on his side.

After this, no matter what he did, everything rebounded onto him.



It rained for the whole day.

During practice at the dojo, Yui asked: “You haven’t coming to the club at all lately, are you okay?” Chihiro didn’t look at her face, and only responded, “I’m fine”. Chihiro could not look Yui in the eye at all, because they were enemies. In hindsight, he was really very lucky when this all began, when he could cause the phenomena on one hand and treat them with a normal attitude on the other. Now, Chihiro no longer remembered how he did it.

But was it because he had not responded to Yui while looking at her face despite approaching her so closely?

After that, for some reason, he wanted to chat with her.

At the same time, he wanted someone to treat him kindly. He’d been facing enemies a lot lately and felt a bit fatigued.

On the way back home after practice ended, Chihiro got close behind Yui.

Yui twirled her pink umbrella as she walked.

In order to not be drowned out by the rain, Chihiro raised his voice slightly and declared louder than usual:

“[A friend whom KiriYama Yui most wants to be her confidante right now.]”

As Chihiro said this, he simultaneously pulled back the distance between himself and Yui.

“Hm... Huh, Chinatsu?! Chinatsu, right?!”

Extremely surprised, Yui ran towards him, her polka-dot rainboots making *splish-splash* noises in the puddles.

“When did you come back? Did you have a good time over there? Did you practice hard?” As Yui demanded these things of him, Chihiro learned that Chinatsu once lived in this town but had moved somewhere else, and was also practicing karate. Also, he seemed to have heard this name somewhere before... Just as Chihiro was pondering this, he remembered a girl named Mihashi Chinatsu, an opponent of Yui’s in a tournament. Her ponytail was very distinctive and she was a girl even more competitive than Yui.

It was very lucky for Chihiro [Mihashi] that Yui wanted to confide in someone he sort of knew. After all, holding a long conversation when he knew nothing at all was really too difficult.

“Whatever you want to tell me today, I’ll listen to all of it.”

Chihiro [Mihashi] declared, making it difficult for Yui to raise questions. He had added a similar condition upon activating [Fantasy Projection], and that way he should be able to reduce his own talking as much as possible. That way, he could extend the time that... Huh?

What on earth was he doing?

“Really? Yay~! Let’s find a shop then...”

“Um, let’s not go inside a shop...”

What was he doing?

“Hm, why?”

He was — Right, he was disguising himself as a good friend of Yui’s in order to get a hint for his next actions. He would carefully talk to her and come up with a countermeasure. Not a bad plan.

After deciding on his goal, his mood also steadied, and Chihiro regained his calm.

“Um, I’m waiting on a call, and when it comes I’ll have to go right away, so it’s more convenient if we just stand here and talk.”

“Huuuh, but it’s raining, though?”

“Don’t worry about it. Those boots and umbrella are really cute.”

He first had to prepare a situation in which he could leave at any time. Chihiro [Mihashi] flattered Yui in passing.

“I know, right?! A girl’s real value is in how cute she can dress herself whether it’s raining, snowing, or storming!”

“You shouldn’t need to try that hard during a storm, right?”

“That’s the challenge!... Although, it’s really rare that you would praise me like this, Chinatsu? What’s up... Ah, you aren’t the imposter, are you...”

Did she find out? Chihiro [Mihashi] hurriedly spoke first:

“Imposter?”

“N-No. It’s nothing. ... She’s right, we need to try and trust each other.”

He seemed to have successfully tided it over.

Yui talked about this and that, and this and that. Was it because she was with a friend whom she hadn’t seen for some time? She was very excited. He had already gotten a very good wealth of information, but he seemed unable to immediately put it to use.

Before he knew it, Yui started talking about the boys in the Cultural Research Club. She did mention Taichi and Chihiro, but central to the topic was, as expected, Aoki Yoshifumi.

“— And that’s why Aoki really troubles me.”

It was all about Aoki.

“Aoki, he —”

It was all about Aoki.

“— so, Aoki was...”

It was all about Aoki.

“So, because of that —”

Unable to endure it a moment longer, Chihiro [Mihashi] interrupted Yui. He did not want to hear Aoki’s name come out of Yui’s mouth; he felt as though it were a declaration of his own failure.

Yui closed her flower bud-like lips, and stood there. Chihiro momentarily forgot that he had just interrupted her; he had to say something.

He had to say something.

The sound of the rain splashing onto the umbrella seemed louder than before.

“So, how exactly do you see Aoki-san, Yui-san?”

This question slid very naturally from Chihiro [Mihashi]’s mouth.

At this, Yui said nothing for a while.

A breeze picked up, and large droplets of rain knocked against Chihiro [Mihashi]’s umbrella with a *pitter-patter*, but the rain itself showed no signs of intensifying.

“Hmm...”

Yui, who would normally go red in the face and raise her voice when approaching this subject, was very calm right now. Was it because she was seeing him as Mihashi Chinatsu?

Right now, Yui was speaking from the heart.

If only the rain grew harder right now, Chihiro thought.

“I’ve always thought that, if I start to [love] the other person because he told

me that he [loves] me, that doesn't seem to be real love. If the other person does a lot for me and then I'm moved, I don't think that's love either."

A moment of silence.

"But, I've decided to settle it."

Her voice was very clear as it went straight into Chihiro's ears, not drowned out by the rain.

"Really?"

"I mean, I said that I've decided, but I probably actually have to wait for a bit longer!"

Yui swung her umbrella back and forth embarrassedly. It really did seem like her style.

"No matter what, when I settle it, I'll tell you about it."

"No ne... Ah, okay."

He had almost said "No need" in refusal; Chihiro frantically changed his words into agreement.

Ahh, then, at last.

To acknowledge this ending.

"Also, what do you think about Uwa Chihiro?"

"Huh, Chihiro-kun?"

Yui murmured, as though wondering why he would ask that, then answered:

"Hmm, lemme think... We've known each other for a real long time at the dojo, and he joined the Cultural Research Club at my invitation. My ratings have gone up because I found us a new member!"

She grinned triumphantly.

"Chihiro-kun's a bit rebellious, and sometimes he'll bully me... but among the boys, he's probably the cutest underclassman."

Yui smiled cheerfully and brightly.

She was laughing at him.

No, so, what was he doing?

Don't become a vulgar existence that clings to vulgar things. Had he gone soft? Pathetic. He had things he needed to do, needed to do no matter what.

<Heartseed>'s voice resounded in his mind.

His body began to tremble from his core. Chihiro clenched the handle of the umbrella so tightly that his left hand began to slowly lose feeling.

He had to win no matter what; he had nowhere to run, and no one could rescue him.

“Bye-bye.”

Yui's presence gradually grew far away from him, and Chihiro walked alone.

No one was looking at him, and no one acknowledged his existence.

“AAA!”

Chihiro roared towards the sky.



Pitch-black clouds engulfed his mind. Chihiro had utterly no idea what he was supposed to do. He couldn't think of a plan that would work as usual even if he were to change his point of attack.

The five second years of the Cultural Research Club gradually returned to normal. To them, [Fantasy Projection] and his existence seemed to be an insignificant trifle.

He once thought that the power of [Fantasy Projection] was the strongest, but he had gotten it wrong. Now that he thought about it calmly, it was a defective product riddled with holes. Why had he felt so naively happy under the belief that he had received power back then?

Even though <Heartseed> had told him that "Everything depends on how you use it", no matter what he did, the results were the same. There was no way that he was worse than other people.

But objectively, he was — no, he wouldn't admit it, he couldn't admit it. He'd never be able to overcome the setback once he admitted it.

In the morning, Chihiro prepared for school and went on his way.

Before he had exited the door of his home, his mother had asked: "You haven't been looking so good recently, is everything all right?" Chihiro could not remember how he had answered.

His mind had not yet woken up by the time he entered the classroom. Chihiro stumbled through the morning in a daze. He seemed to have talked to someone, but he couldn't remember who he had talked to or what he had talked about. Come to think of it, Enjouji seemed to be watching him concernedly all the while. But that didn't matter.

Chihiro had no appetite at all during lunch break, so he left the classroom alone.

The crowd of students heading for the cafeteria filled the corridor with a cacophony of noise. The students eating inside the classroom were also very noisy.

All of a sudden, Chihiro truly, personally felt that he was quite lonely.

Did everyone feel the same way? Or was he the only one?

No matter what, there was no place for him here.

Chihiro wobbled and dithered around the school building, and before he knew it, he found himself standing in front of the club building. He had been wandering towards a place with no people, but his feet had taken him here of their own accord.

Since he was here, he might as well retrieve the recorder he had set up in the clubroom.

Chihiro climbed the stairs, arrived at the fourth floor, turned the corner — and what was in front of him made him doubt his own eyes.

Striking, long chestnut hair, a petite body, a familiar profile.

Kiriyama Yui was standing there.

Ever since he had bid her farewell in the rain yesterday, this was his first time seeing her.

Yui was about to enter the clubroom and had not noticed Chihiro yet.

Chihiro suddenly felt that he did not want her to see him; in any case, he did not want to meet her right now.

He slowly, slowly, backed away.

“Hm? Chihiro-ku —”

“[Yaegashi Taichi as Kiriyama Yui sees him!]”

Chihiro yelled in panic, and Yui instantly froze.

“Huh? Oh, Taichi. ... For a second, you looked a lot like Chihiro-kun...?”

Hmmm. Yui sighed confusedly and furrowed her brow.

“You were probably imagining things.”

Did I just barely make it?

Chihiro [Taichi] said, and the originally tense mood temporarily exhaled.

“Well, you’re right. Let’s go inside.”

“Hey, isn’t that Kiriya and Chihiro? What’s going on? We didn’t call Chihiro to meet as well, did we?”

It was a voice he absolutely did not want to hear.

So the second year students would gather together during lunch break?

“... Ah, huh? ... Huh? Taichi is... here, Taichi is... Huh? Two Taichis?”

The one climbing up the stairs to the clubroom was Yaegashi Taichi, and right now, he himself was using [Fantasy Projection] to make Yui think he was Yaegashi Taichi; in other words, at this moment, Yui was seeing two Yaegashi Taichis.

This was the severe, completely unerasable paradox that <Heartseed> had once spoken of.

What on earth were the consequences? Someone should have mentioned it. <Heartseed>.

There would be a very troublesome situation indeed.

What did troublesome mean? Would it happen to him, or to Yui?

What the hell would a troublesome situation caused by a phenomenon beyond human knowledge be like?

And a third person had caught him using [Fantasy Projection]. At this rate, they would realize that he is the offender.

Chihiro descended into panic.

Did he want to immediately vanish from the scene? If it came to light that he had started the [Fantasy Projection] phenomenon, then everything would be over. Taichi could see him: to him, Uwa Chihiro was Uwa Chihiro, and Uwa Chihiro was right here. Things could not develop that way. Think of a plan to deceive his way through? He had to think of a way to deceive them, there was no time to hesitate. In order to survive, he had to make sure that they didn't discover that he was himself.

“[Inaba... Enjouji Shino as Yaegashi Taichi sees her!]”

That was too close. Chihiro wiped cold sweat from his brow. He had almost blurted out Inaba's name under duress, but Inaba might come to the clubroom at any time.

“Chihiro... No... Oh, Inaba?”

Chihiro's mind was blank.

Did only the first name he called out work? Sweat poured from Chihiro's entire body.

It can't be helped. It can't be helped. It can't be helped. It can't be helped. Calm down.

In any case, he had to leave the scene first —

“Oh, Taichi... Oh, Chihiro too? Why are you here?”

Inaba Himeko climbed up the stairs to the clubroom.

Taichi should be seeing both the real Inaba and the imposter [Inaba].

“Ah... hah? Inaba and... Inaba... Two Inabas... Two? Inaba... Inaba...”

Taichi murmured to himself.

“Taichi is... Taichi? Two... Taichis...? Taichi... Two of him?”

Yui murmured to herself.

Taichi and Yui widened their eyes; their eyeballs seemed ready to leap from their sockets. The two of them seemed to have broken, muttering nonstop.

Chihiro shook with fear, feeling that his body might break down from shaking.

He could no longer distinguish between front, back, left, or right.

Yui and Taichi's eyes lost focus, and they went unconscious.

Broken.

Broken.

The one who had broken them was none other than Uwa Chihiro, this incompetent piece of trash.

Then, Kiriya Yui and Yaegashi Taichi collapsed, their memories gone.

Chapter 6: The Protagonist of this Story is...

Having finished lunch with her friends and headed back to the classroom from the cafeteria, Enjouji Shino found Nagase Iori, Inaba Himeko, and Aoki Yoshifumi in the courtyard. These three were Shino's upperclassmen in the Cultural Research Club.

Shino told her friends to please go back to the classroom without her.

I should go say hi to them.

Shino thought, but she was unable to take the steps forward. Shino could not move, as though her feet had sprouted roots into the ground. If she stayed here, would they see her? She thought as she stared at the three of them. She could not hear them talking, though they were somewhat far apart.

She had always been like this, staying in the same position.

But right now her feet felt so heavy, and there were other reasons too.

Just then, Kiriya Yui, also an upperclassman from the Cultural Research Club, and someone who appeared to be her friend walked past the three people in the midst of a discussion.

Normally, Yui would fly towards the three and chat with them for a bit.

But she only nodded slightly towards them out of courtesy, then left together with her friends.

As if they were strangers.

It felt like they were not friends, merely acquaintances.

This scene made Nagase look very lonely, Inaba extremely hurt, and Aoki at the end of his rope. Her upperclassmen who had always been shining dazzlingly now exuded a jet-black, murky atmosphere, and their scintillating bonds were nowhere to be found.

The thread of their bonds had not just been severed; it had utterly vanished.

Yui and the girl walked together towards Shino, and she could hear the conversation between the two of them.

“Hey, Yui, did something happen with you at the club? You seem to have grown distant from your friends at the Cultural Research Club?”

“No... Nothing like that, Yukina, really... It’s nothing.”

“That’s~ really~ suspicious~, though? And you seem to be keeping your distance from Iori and Yaegashi Taichi in class too.”

“You’re imagining things... Don’t think about it. ... Please.”

“... Since you’re asking me like that, there’s nothing I can do but listen like a good girl... If there’s anything bothering you, just come talk to me... Ah!”

The girl walking beside Yui met eyes with Shino. At closer inspection, she was someone Shino had seen before. When Shino was with the Cultural Research Club during the Club Tryouts and participating in the marathon, Yukina was a member of the Track and Field Club who had helped her out a lot.

She seemed to notice her and smiled a pearly-white smile, causing Shino to hurriedly bow her head out of courtesy. Shino was a bit moved; she seemed to still remember her.

But, walking beside her, Yui glanced at Shino and immediately returned her gaze forward, passing Shino just like that.

Without a word, without a wave.

Her expression unchanging, as though she had seen an entirely unacquainted passersby.



After a certain day, Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriya Yui had lost the portions of their memories having to do with the Cultural Research Club.

Why would they lose their memories? What had changed in them? These were mysteries, and the only thing she knew was that Taichi and Yui had

suddenly collapsed and lost their memories.

Sudden amnesia should have warranted immediately being rushed to the hospital and treated, but Inaba-senpai and the others deemed this unnecessary because they had only lost a limited amount of memories — other than that, they seemed to know the reason behind it but did not elaborate on the subject.

The two of them had forgotten the existence of the Cultural Research Club, what had happened in the Cultural Research Club, and the relationships built among them by the Cultural Research Club... as though the parts relating to the Cultural Research Club alone had fallen cleanly out of their minds.

On the other hand, they remembered everything except the Cultural Research Club, so Taichi and Yui's daily lives didn't appear to be affected at all.

Other than that, Taichi and Yui still viewed the second years of the Cultural Research Club as classmates from the same year despite no longer having memories of the Cultural Research Club. Therefore, although their fellow classmates felt that something was wrong, they didn't seem to realize that the two of them had lost parts of their memories.

Shino and Uwa Chihiro, who had only met them through the Cultural Research Club, had been completely forgotten.

Shino and Chihiro had completely disappeared from Taichi and Yui's worlds. It couldn't be helped.

Shino recalled what Iori, Inaba, and Aoki had told her.

Taichi and Yui did not feel that they had lost any memories, because, after all, they had [never had] those memories to begin with.

But how were they to explain that they had never attended the club? After all, they had forgotten that they once belonged to the Cultural Research Club.

After being asked about this themselves, Taichi asserted that he was a member of the Pro Wrestling Research Club, and Yui the Fancy Club (what kind of club would that be?). Although they were the only members of their respective clubs, they were very adamant that they were approved special

cases. The two of them were attempting to perfectly adapt into a world [without] the Cultural Research Club.

With things like this, Iori, Inaba, and Aoki could not, of course, simply remain silent. To help Taichi and Yui restore their memories, the three of them had immediately recounted to them memories from before and shown them the resulting works of club activities to no avail. Whenever they tried to do this, Taichi and Yui would seemingly develop excruciating, splitting headaches, leaving them utterly unable to speak.

Although Taichi and Yui were aware that everyone around them saw them as friends from the Cultural Research Club and thought that they themselves [might have forgotten something], their heads would experience crippling pain whenever they drew near the heart of the matter, rendering them unable to investigate further.

Also for that reason, Taichi and Yui decided to forget everything about the Cultural Research Club and get on with their normal school lives — that was how it is.

The upperclassmen finished with Inaba at the center of the discussion, and explained somewhat uneasily: “You may not believe this, and you may not be able to accept our decision to keep them from going to the hospital to get checked out, but we can’t keep you and Chihiro in the dark about this...”

But Shino was able to say to the three of them, resolutely and decisively:

“I believe you.”

She had to believe.

But it was already too late. The real thing she had to believe in was already gone forever.

She had done nothing, so she was irrelevant. She could say that, too.

But bystanders who clearly had the chance to do something yet ended up doing nothing at all were also the perpetrators. In that regard, she had indeed committed a sin.

She had destroyed that beautiful world.

She was, as expected, a useless dimwit.



That morning, Shino plucked up the courage to question Chihiro. She wasn't going to look away any longer.

She'd tried it several times before, but Chihiro would escape every time.

Shino swore to herself that she must succeed this time. She had to give it her best effort, because this was her duty; only she could do this.

"Chi-Chihiro-kun."

She had turned over a new leaf.

Her determination was genuine.

In that nearly empty corridor, Chihiro spun his head around without a word.

"Hee..."

Chihiro's expression was giving off a very dangerous air, and Shino couldn't help but yelp. He had very severe eye-circles, his eyes themselves were stiff, his cheeks were quite sunken, and he looked ill, or unpredictable.

His situation had been becoming worse and worse all this time. Shino thought he was at the end of his rope.

And the reason was—

"Our... Our senpais are really in a jam now."

Chihiro displayed no reaction at all, continuing to stare at Shino with eyes like those of a dead fish.

"... I-I think that there must be some reason behind it... Huh? Ah, if there weren't a reason, then they wouldn't become like that, so there must be some reason. But that's not what I mean... Um..."

Even she was beginning to become confused over what she was saying.

"I-I-I mean—"

She swallowed nervously.

Chihiro did not move. He looked like a zombie.

“Um... The reason is...”

Don’t be scared. I have to take this step.

Shino felt hot tears welling up.

“Does it have anything to do with you, Chihiro-kun...?”

With [him]. It’s [him]. [He] is...

If [he], who Shino had thought a lie, were actually a real existence...

Chihiro’s face grew stark white. Astonishment and terror dominated it.

Seeing his expression, Shino understood.

It wasn’t a dream, an illusion, a lie, make-believe, or something that had nothing to do with her.

That was the reality descending upon her.

“... Huh? Huuuhh? What’re you saying?”

Chihiro uttered after a long period of silence, his words very incoherent.

“I mean... Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai losing their memories, it has to do with [him]... and you have to do with this as well, Chihiro-kun, that’s the reason...”

“What’s the reason?”

Chihiro stared at Shino viciously, his drifting vision now stable, as though he had suddenly gotten over the situation.

The dangerous vibe that was coming from his entire body, accompanied by his pale face, was really quite terrifying, causing Shino to shrink back in fear.

“Hey, Enjouji. Talk to me. What’s the reason?”

His eyes were not normal at all. The abnormal Chihiro suddenly brought his face up close to Shino’s.

It was impossible to predict what this Chihiro might do.

“D’you know [him] too?”

— He might end up erasing his own memories?

The instant her thoughts reached that point, her body and mind froze.

She didn't know anything. She didn't see anything. She didn't hear anything. She wanted nothing to do with it.

"... Wh-Who?"

She was the one who had brought it up, but she had said something different. She smiled stupidly.

Plastering an evasive grin on her face, she tided it over.

Shino thought of nothing, only able to put on such a smile.

That was how she had always done it. Her body was already accustomed to this sort of conditioned reflex.

It adhered to the habits permeating her body, indelible.

What did she look like to Chihiro right now?

Chihiro said:

"Nobody."

Abandoned.

Rejected by Chihiro, by the world.

"You don't know either, do you?"

Chihiro asked as though interrogating her, but before she knew it, Shino was saying "Y-Yeah" in agreement, through no will of her own.

She was only blindly going with the flow, moving as though she were a marionette being controlled by someone else.

"Yup."

Chihiro smiled darkly, then, as though declaring that the conversation had ended, spun around to leave.

Shino watched his departing figure, and suddenly came back to earth.

What was she doing? This wasn't it. Hadn't she made a firm resolution?

Perhaps it was too late, but Shino ran after Chihiro.

“Chi-Chihiro-kun!”

“... What?”

“Uh, um... <Heartseed> is — *oof!?*”

Chihiro had seized the ribbon on Shino’s uniform and yanked her towards him, hard.

His bloodshot eyes flashed sharply before hers.

“Don’t mention that name.”

Feeling that her life was in danger, Shino nodded frantically as though she were trembling.

Her neck was uncomfortably constricted as he tugged forcefully on her ribbon. Scary. Tears rolled in her eyes.

Her own trembling was transferred onto Chihiro’s hand, making him shake as well.

She shook wildly with fear, her body vibrating... No? The one trembling was... Chihiro?

Shino thought that she, her collar seized, was the one being threatened. Chihiro, having seized her collar, was threatening her.

But the hand that Chihiro was using to grab her collar appeared to be pleading for help.

For some reason, this summoned her courage.

Take that step forward.

“Chi-Chihiro-kun... Because... I have to be the one to admit it! Like... Like you, I’ve met <Heartseed> — *Uhh!?*”

“I told you not to mention that name!”

Intimidating. Scary. Don’t do scary things like that.

“Uhh... Ooh...”

Tears spilled from her eyes. Breathing was difficult. It wasn’t because her

windpipe was constricted, but because Shino was unable to exhale normally. Or inhale normally. Her method, and rhythm, of breathing was out of order.

Shino couldn't speak. Chihiro released her violently, cast down a "Stay away from me", and ran away.

She tried several times more after that, but was not able to get anything from him.

She, Enjouji Shino, had once met <Heartseed> in the form of Gotou Ryuuzen.

One day, when she had been walking her dog, someone suddenly stopped her.

He had shown Shino miraculous power.

He had arranged a situation in which one could not help but believe that someone had possessed Gotou Ryuuzen.

Then, he had said that he wanted to give her a miraculous power.

He had hoped that Shino would use that power to do certain things to the five second-years of the Cultural Research Club.

Frightened, Shino had rejected him. He had then said that Uwa Chihiro was in the same situation as her, so everything was fine.

Even so, Shino had still felt scared, so she had rejected him and fled without so much as looking back.

Shino had thought it a daydream or a hallucination. She had shut her eyes, refusing to believe that it had been real. Because that sort of thing was impossible in the real world.

She would be unable to deal with it. She would be unable to bear it and would be crushed for sure. She really hoped that he would not push something so immense onto her.

So Shino had acted as if none of it had ever happened.

She had dismissed it all as an illusion and banished it from her world.

But, Chihiro seemed to have given a completely different response.

And then — he had caused something.

Shino had not listened to <Heartseed> when he had explained the power he was intending to bestow upon her, so she wasn't very clear on that.

Therefore, she was unable to decide exactly what she was supposed to do right now. In order to solve the problem, the first thing she had to do was to ask Chihiro exactly what was going on.

Solve?

Such a presumptuous word.

She couldn't even take the first step — asking Chihiro exactly what was going on.

No matter whether she actually did something or not, someone like her was unable to change anything in the end.

Enjouji Shino was utterly powerless. There was no doubt that she was merely a supporting role in this world.

She set out to do her absolute best today, to straighten up and fight.

But there was already nothing for her to do.

There was a full practice day after school that day.

Like everyone else, Shino arrived on the field in her PE uniform, and saw Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki gathered together. She had seen them huddled together in discussion many times recently.

"Ah, senpai. About today's club activities..."

"Sorry. We're taking today off too."

Inaba said shortly, looking slightly irritated.

"... Hey, you didn't do anything wrong, so don't look so gloomy, okay? But... we might have to temporarily suspend club activities. Sorry."

Inaba then said gently to Shino, apparently feeling that she had just vented her anger on her.

“Ah, uh... O-Okay. I see...”

“We’re sorry, Shino-chan.”

Nagase hugged her kindly. It wasn’t with her usual jocular attitude, but in consolation.

Aoki asked: “Just to be clear, nothing’s happened, right, Shino? Has anyone around you been saying strange things or acting weirdly?”

“... I-I think everything’s fine, more or less...”

This was the truth, so that’s what Shino said.

But in reality, she was a perpetrator.

Inaba and the others had clearly been hurt rather deeply, yet they were always worried about Shino and Chihiro.

Their consideration for them was much too warm. It almost brought tears to her eyes.

At the same time, her chest stabbed with pain.

She was well aware of the situation, but Shino still found herself unable to tell Inaba and the others about <Heartseed> and Chihiro. She felt like she was betraying their trust.

Even if she did tell them about <Heartseed>, they wouldn’t believe her. Moreover, she thought about how <Heartseed> had told her: *“It’s best if you don’t tell other people about me... For the sake of those around you.”* This made it even harder for her to run her mouth. Chihiro ought to be more knowledgeable than her about the details, so the only thing she could do was to first break down the walls around his heart.

That was why Shino could not come out and say that she wanted to help, and could not enter their circle of three.

Shino parted from Nagase’s soft chest and took a step backwards.

“... It’s really a shame that I can’t go to club activities, but it can’t be helped in this sort of situation.”

She said without looking the three of them in the eyes.

They apologized to her again. “It’s all right,” she said with a thin smile. What exactly was all right? Shino wasn’t very clear on that herself.

Just then, Yaegashi Taichi and Kiriya Yui were passing by.

“Taichi.....!”

“Yui.....!”

Inaba and Aoki suddenly lit up. Nagase clasped her hands together tightly.

Shino watched them, then looked towards Taichi and Yui, and her heart accelerated.

The two of them, having descended to normal students following their amnesia, were walking side by side.

As though they were both still good friends.

Anticipation rose in her chest.

Maybe everything that had happened up until today had all been a dream—.

Taichi and Yui noticed the existence of Inaba and the others.

The two of them revealed awkward expressions. Taichi took large steps and pivoted to the right, while Yui pivoted towards the left.

They avoided where Shino and Inaba were standing, made a large circle, and headed towards the center of the field.

The distance between the pair and the trio grew gradually larger, gradually further.

The pentagon did not revive.

Instead, everyone personally experienced the truth: that Taichi and Yui were avoiding them.

“Tai... chi...”

Inaba called blankly, her outstretched right hand grabbing nothing at all.

Once such a loving couple, they were now unable to know the feeling of each other’s skin, or even speak to each other.

Nothing was left between the two of them.

Then, heartbroken, Inaba collapsed to the ground.

“I-Inaban!?”

Nagase hurried to support her.

“... Ah, sorry. ... I wasn't... standing properly.”

Inaba tried to be tough, but inside she was nearing her limit, on the verge of total collapse.

She couldn't watch this. Shino turned her face away.

The upperclassmen of the Cultural Research Club were unexpectedly helpless. This was impossible. Shino didn't want to believe it.

Even if she couldn't do it, they would definitely find a way. For sure.

There was no way that the future of all of this rested on her own shoulders.

That would be too much. She couldn't do anything.

The pentagon that she had once admired had become a heptagon after she and Chihiro had joined. She had once worried about disturbing their balance, but the heptagon, with two new additions, seemed to maintain a different kind of balance.

But that heptagon had broken down. Without two people, only five of them could gather now. They had lost Taichi and Yui, to be replaced by Shino and Chihiro.

Maybe, by chance, she was now a vertex of the pentagon she had once admired. But that wasn't the way she wanted it at all. Shino did not want it to become a pentagon like this.

The Cultural Research Club of Yamaboshi High School seemed only to allow a pentagon to exist. As though by the will of fate, after two new students joined, two others were immediately ejected.

Did the world really determine the fate of the Cultural Research Club like this?

She could only resign herself to it, and blindly go with the flow. She had lost to this world again.

Shino did not want to lose, but...

No one was looking at her, but Shino bowed her head in respect and left the scene.

The full practice for the athletics festival began, and after that came each team's cheer competition practice.

Shino and Inaba's classes belonged to the Green Team, and practice was chaos.

The Green Team's performances were divided into third years, and first with second years. The two groups were responsible for performing completely different movements, so they practiced separately, but the situation on the first and second years' side was a spectacle too horrible to behold.

The biggest reason was that Class 1-B, where Shino was, was utterly devoid of morale.

Moreover, Inaba had become sluggish as leader and Aoki was down in the dumps as hype man, so today's practice was even more terrible than usual.

"Let's review the movements, then—!"

"Put some more feeling into your movements—!"

The second years were doing their best, but no matter what, they were unable to change the cold aura wafting around the first years. The first years shuffled around lazily and listlessly, looking like a bunch of zombies.

"This is so much work."

"It's so hot."

"This is ridiculous."

"What's with this cheer competition crap?"

A bunch of them complained resentfully in low voices. None of them were loud enough to be clearly heard, but they all coagulated into a cacophony of noise that transformed into a mass of spite, burrowing into the second years' ears, making the atmosphere worse and worse. The heavy, depressing air made Shino gloomy along with it.

She wasn't the one being blamed, but her stomach began to hurt.

She really didn't like this. She wanted to go home.

She didn't say it aloud, but Shino's mood must have been making the mass of spite even heavier. In other words, she was a perpetrator of this as well.

No matter when, she was always a bystander; before she realized it, she had already become a perpetrator.

Even as she thought about this, she still did nothing.

She had clearly realized it, yet she acted as though she was unable to move, making the mass of spite even heavier.

Because everyone was doing the same thing. Because she didn't mean to. Because this also couldn't be helped.

So she hadn't done anything wrong.

Just then, Shino suddenly noticed the person standing in front, who was clearly their rep, yet whose movements were even more sluggish than everyone else's.

It was Uwa Chihiro.

Black aura poured from his entire body, as though intending to plunge the bright moods around him into darkness as well.

As to the trouble that the Cultural Research Club was in, she did nothing about it; the main culprit might be Chihiro, and that was the truth.

But—

No matter when, she was always a bystander; before she realized it, she had already become a perpetrator.



She really hated this version of herself.

When the athletics festival practice had ended and she had changed back into

her uniform, Shino, recalling herself over the entire day, walked to the roof of the east school building and lowered her head gloomily.

She watched the field from afar, against the wind.

She wanted to stare into space alone. There were a few people on the rooftop, but no one was paying attention to their surroundings so she didn't need to pay attention to other people's lines of sight. It didn't feel hot either, as the clouds had thickened above her.

Shino leaned on the rooftop fence and sighed.

She really was much too useless, much too unsightly.

This time, she had to do her best; that determination was absolutely genuine. Although she had acted with that sort of mindset, before she knew it she had instead been imprisoned by negative thoughts and changed back into her regular indecisive self.

Shino acknowledged that she had made an important resolution. She murmured to herself that she had already turned over a new leaf, and just this morning, she had indeed held strong will.

But she couldn't maintain a mood like that for even half a day.

This was her own responsibility, something only she could deal with — Shino had encouraged and heartened herself like that, but somewhere in the process, she had reverted to her old self, presenting all responsibilities for other people to take care of, pushing everything to someone else.

How many times had she followed the same road until today?

Sometimes it was self-help books; sometimes it was novels; sometimes it was manga; sometimes it was movies; elements of all kinds had changed Shino and, most importantly, she herself knew that [it can't go on like this], so there were numerous times she had tried challenging herself.

She wanted to become more open, she wanted to get fitter, she wanted to become better at her studies, she wanted more friends, she wanted a happier life, she wanted everyone to like her more.

She wanted to become happier.

She wanted to change, so she had to change.

To change, she tried to take a step.

But even if it were to chase her dreams, whether she took one step, two steps, or three, it would always result in her stopping, unable to continue, and returning to square one.

It was enough to make one wonder whether there were some unseen force in this world, which decided from the beginning between those who could proceed and those who couldn't.

Why couldn't she change?

She took a step forward.

When she became a high school student and decided that she would master her own high school life and very important club activities, Shino embarked on a huge adventure. Shino tried hard to approach the people on a different dimension than herself in order to get closer to her ideals.

She took a step forward.

Even though she was scared out of her mind, she acknowledged the existence of a monster like <Heartseed>.

She took a step forward.

To break through the impasse, she had faced the terrifying Chihiro head-on.

Shino had tried to act, had tried with all of her might.

But even as she took the step, she was still unable to do it.

She felt that she was unable to do anything at all.

Powerless, unable to leave any legacy.

There was no meaning in her continuing to live in this world.

Through the gaps in the fence, Shino looked towards the ground. The roof was very high up. If she were to climb over the fence and jump down, her body would be smashed into a pulp and she wouldn't need to live such a torturous life anymore — Wait, what was she thinking? She shouldn't be thinking like that, even as a joke. Shino felt afraid of her own despondent thoughts, so she

left the fence.

Just then, Shino spotted someone resembling Nagase in the courtyard.

She observed carefully, and realized that not only was it Nagase, but Inaba and Aoki were also present. They seemed to be discussing something as a group again.

Shino watched the miniscule trio from far above in the sky.

Her upperclassmen, who usually looked so great, looked like mere insignificant humans if she watched them from above like this. Did God look upon humans on the ground like this as well?

If that were the case, then the acts of humans must be very foolish.

She had clearly been born into a predestined fate, yet she wanted to engage in meaningless resistance; she was clearly supposed to go with the flow, yet she had tried to revolt, resulting in unnecessary wounds.

What use was there in living like that?

On the ground before her, the trio separated simultaneously.

Had they suddenly agreed on something? Or did they have other matters to tend to?

In any case, the three of them ran in different directions.

Inaba headed for the north school building, Nagase headed towards the east school building, and Aoki headed towards the school gate.

Insignificant humans running in a straight line.

Insignificant humans speeding along, full of energy.

Insignificant humans... No, they weren't insignificant at all.

The three of them looked very great indeed.

Shino didn't know for what reason they seemed so huge, and besides, they couldn't really become large. Looking down from the rooftop of the school building, the three of them appeared very insignificant.

But they gave her a feeling of greatness, and were shining with dazzling light.

Why?

For what reason?

If someone knew, please tell her.

Please tell her the reason, so she could become like them.

What secret was concealed within?

— It is this.

Hadn't she joined the Cultural Research Club just to discover this secret?

Hadn't she plucked up her courage and taken a step forward?

Shino recalled her mood at the time.

She had once acted; she could take a step forward.

Even if she stopped after the second or third step, hadn't she taken a step forward all the same?

If so, then she should take that challenge again.

She can do it.

Shino took a step.

Shino walked down the stairs and passed through a corridor, heading for Room 401 in the club building.

She wanted to take that step, to change herself — Shino murmured in her heart, advancing forward.

This wouldn't do, she had to pull herself together. To encourage herself, Shino intended to head towards the club building, and there she would carefully recall the courage she had given herself and what she had learned from her upperclassmen.

Shino climbed up the stairs of the club building.

She stoked the fire in her heart, letting it burn red-hot, storing energy to fight.

— You've tried this many times before, haven't you?

An evil voice murmured to her in her heart.

— But you were still unable to do anything, weren't you?

No, I have to do it this time.

— How many times in your life have you told yourself [I have to do it this time] until today?

I've said it many times, but I've never been able to really achieve my goal. Because I fail, the next [I have to do it this time] will pop up, and I know it in my heart.

— Then just give up, why don't you?

Even so, I still don't want to give up. As long as I don't give up, it won't end.

— Only the meaningless effort will not end. The true [beginning] you desire will still be nowhere in sight.

Maybe that's true.

— You should understand the terrible, horrifying tragedy that has been realized this time, right?

Yeah, true.

The terrible crime she had committed against Taichi and Yui had caused Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki immeasurable sorrow, and so she personally experienced how utterly insignificant she was.

Her feet climbing the stairs slowed, her body grew leaden, and she seemed about to stop.

But the three people in even greater despair than she were still going at it even today.

Although it would sometimes hide behind the clouds, they still resembled the sun, illuminating the earth, shining brightly on Shino.

So, she would do her best as well.

Advance, with the sun as her goal.

Just one more step, just one more, for the last time.

This was a mantra she had chanted numerous times until today. Shino repeated the mantra endlessly while taking the steps.

She began to feel like crying, but she did not stop stepping up the stairs. She could not stop.

Even if she couldn't do it, even if she couldn't act, even if she couldn't change — no matter how useless she was, she could only continue walking like this.

Endlessly. Endlessly. Endlessly.

From now on, as well. From now on, as well. From now on, as well.

And the ending that would always happen — did not happen at all.

Yaegashi Taichi was standing in front of the clubroom.

At least Shino had not, like always, tried her absolute hardest to take a step forward, one, two, three, and then stopped. Rather, she was currently deviating from that path.

Because Yaegashi Taichi was there.

Once she saw Taichi and gained strength, she was no longer by herself, and it was two people working together instead?

Rather rather rather rather... Forget that for now! Taichi, who had forgotten his own affiliation with the Cultural Research Club, was visiting the clubroom. In other words, did this mean that he had regained his memories? If that were the case, then how wonderful would that be?

Taichi seemed to detect someone's eyes on him, and looked towards Shino.

Taichi met eyes with Shino, and both of them acknowledged each other's existence. How long had it been since this happened?

"Ah, are you from this club? Sorry, even if I've got nothing to do with it, I just wanted to come here for some reason... I'm not too sure about it myself... Everyone in my class has been telling me that I've got amnesia. Well, you should probably forget what I just said — *Ahhh!*"

"Taichi-senpaaaaaaai!"

Shino was so deeply moved that she barely even knew where she was driving

towards, bursting into tears and hugging Taichi at the same time.

Taichi must have been very surprised when a girl he didn't know at all hugged him crying. Probably feeling that it would not be very good for someone to see them like this, he dragged Shino to the rooftop. The rooftop of the club building was empty. It seemed that barely anyone would often come here.

"U-Um... I'm r-really sorry!"

Regaining her cool, Shino bowed nonstop in apology. She had gone so far as to perform such a brazen act.

"Ah, no problem, don't worry about it. Just... don't accuse me of sexual harassment."

For some reason, Taichi was feeling apologetic too. Both of them nodded for forgiveness.

"Don't say that, you didn't do anything wrong, Taichi-senpai..."

"Nah, it was my fault..."

"Don't say that..."

"Nah..."

"Don't say that..."

"... Um, let's not keep apologizing to each other like this."

"R-Right! Y-You're right, Taichi-senpai!"

Thanks to Taichi, the nonsensical battle of Japanese apologetic nodding was concluded. As expected of Taichi.

"... Well, I wanted to ask you, you seem to know my situation?"

It had been so long since she last heard Taichi's voice, and listening to his steady, dulcet tones utter the word "you" made her feel as though she were rising into heaven... Uh, that sort of thought is unnecessary right now, let's sweep all of those distractions aside first.

"R-Right."

"I feel really bad saying this... but I don't remember you... How did we meet?"

It pained her for him to say to her face that he didn't remember her.

"Um... We don't really know each other... I know you one-sidedly, Taichi-senpai. Um, I'm Enjouji Shino from Class 1-B, please look after me."

"Enjouji-san, huh? Please look after me as well."

Having been reset to zero, their relationship was now restarting. It felt miraculous. Inaba had warned her, "Don't get too close to Taichi and Yui", worrying that she might put herself into danger as well, but this situation was an unstoppable force... S-She would be forgiven, right?

"That said, why were you crying, Enjouji-san?"

Taichi suddenly hit straight at the core.

"Um... B-Because..."

Well, Iori seemed to have told her before that "*Taichi's sudden attacks are very powerful*". She had also said "*He used that same skill to turn Inaban into that Dereban creature, so you gotta be careful too, Shino-chan!*"

"Uh, that... that's a really hard question..."

"I didn't know you before, Enjouji-san, but since you know me, it must be fate. If there's something bothering you that much, then I want to help you."

— I want to help you.

Without hesitation, Taichi said that to someone he had just met.

Even without his memories, Taichi was still an amazing person.

There was no way she would win against him, even if the tables were turned, or... No, she couldn't say that, this time she had to break the curse of [I have to do it this time] no matter what.

In order to change something, Shino decided to talk about her troubles with Taichi.

She couldn't reveal the details, so Shino was somewhat at a loss for how to explain it to him, but he seemed to largely understand what she wanted to convey.

"No matter how many times you take a step, no matter how hard you try, it's all useless. How do you make a true change — Is that what you want to ask?"

"Y-Yes... Just as you said... Ah, but now, instead of whether or not I made a change, I want to come up with some results..."

If she thought about it, this was a very bizarre situation indeed. The one whom she was seeking help from was actually the one whom she needed to help. She felt like she had messed up somewhere. This didn't seem right at all.

"Results, huh?"

"... I really am a useless person, I can't achieve anything. I've always wanted to do my best, but compared to other people, my effort can't count for much at all... I also don't have a single redeeming quality."

"What makes you think that? Shouldn't you have your own merits, Enjouji-san?"

"N-No, I don't! The amazing people are really amazing, really really amazing!"

"Oh, there are people that amazing?"

"Yeah! Like a certain senpai I know; he's a really kind person, someone with a really strong sense of righteousness, and even says [I want to help you] to someone he's meeting for the first time... Erm."

Whoops! She was actually talking about someone in front of that same someone! He might misunderstand that she had something going on for him.

"Really. He must be pretty cool if you can say that about him."

"He's also a really dense person!"

Thank goodness Taichi is so dense! That was too close, way too close.

"And get this. This girl, who's been called the prettiest girl in school, and another really smart, beautiful, and adorable girl, both like this senpai, and they both fight for his affection. In the end the senpai began dating one of them, and they're really loving to each other."

"Geez, he's got it going for him, doesn't he? Someone should teach him a lesson."

"I think so, too."

Shino was very serious.

"Um... A-Anyway, that's basically it. There's a really amazing person, but I can't do anything at all."

"No, wait, no matter how amazing that person is, they don't have anything to do with your abilities, do they, Enjouji-san?"

"You're not wrong, but... I'm lacking in a lot of places."

"Hey, Enjouji-san, on what grounds are you saying that you [can't do anything at all]?"

"Huh? Because... I'm always a step behind, I'm bad at school, I'm bad at exercise, I can't find the trick to doing anything, I'm really indecisive, and it's really easy for me to get nervous and fail... Probably for those reasons."

As she spoke, she was growing depressed again.

She really had no redeeming qualities at all.

Seeing her like this, Taichi must have been perplexed as well. He had to be thinking about how she was beyond help—

"What? That's it?"

But Taichi said that unexpectedly.

Shino was startled, thinking that she had heard him wrong, but she seemed not to. Shino was startled again.

"Um... you said... that's it? It's not [that's it] at all, is it? What makes you say [that's it]?"

"Ahh, even if it's not [that's it]... You're [only] a step behind, bad at school, bad at exercise, can't find the trick for anything, really indecisive, and easily get nervous and fail, right?"

"O-Only? Those weaknesses are pretty bad, though?!"

"No need to get so worked up... But that's the truth, right?"

"Uh, um, erm... You can say that, but that's a huge problem—"

"But, there's nothing in there that says that you can't do anything at all, is there, Enjouji-san?"

There was nothing in there that said that she couldn't do anything at all.

"B-But..."

"No matter what traits you have, none of them indicate that you can't do anything at all, do they?"

He was right.

Up until now, she had always been able to take a step forward, so she wasn't truly unable to do anything. It could be said that she merely didn't have the endurance to complete a task.

"I think what's really important are the other traits, and furthermore, those should be traits that everyone has." Taichi continued.

"But... But there's someone who can work much harder than I can, and I have to work for a really long time to do something that that person can do easily..."

She couldn't help but say something completely irrelevant.

"Those people should be the ones actually doing things! S-Someone like me, who can't do anything, like a side character... what do I even do—"

"You're not a side character or anything, Enjouji-san. You're an outstanding protagonist."

"P-Protagonist? How could someone like me be a protagonist?! A story like that would be really boring."

"But it would be a story that only you can write, Enjouji-san."

A story that only Enjouji Shino could write.

"Furthermore, if a useless normal person can play a really active part and do something super amazing, wouldn't that be a really interesting story?"

The story of a useless normal person playing a really active part.

A simple, common story indeed.

Be that as it may, the protagonist would not become really active in the story for no reason.

The protagonist usually receives some special power, or...

“Anyway, they act.”

Attempt a very brave act.

Click. Shino heard the sound of a lock being opened.

Something felt amazing. She didn't know why it felt amazing. Different from all those in the past, an [I have to do it this time] seemed to be coming.

Shino even felt that all of her struggles in the past were for this very moment.

Awakening.

Revolution.

“... Wait, hold on. I just... I just said something really embarrassing, didn't I? I shouldn't be that sort of character... No. I think I learned all of this... through something...”

Taichi looked somewhat embarrassed himself, and tilted his head in astonishment.

Even if his memories about the Cultural Research Club had disappeared, would he still keep the things he had received from it?

“You talk in a pretty sappy way, Taichi-senpai. Do girls like you because you talk like that?”

“S-Sappy?! Even if I am liked, ‘sappy’ is a bit too... But I'm not liked, though.”

“Of course, I think everyone loves you because of your voice, Taichi-senpai!”

“Are you even listening to me?!”

Taichi's frantic expression was so comical that Shino couldn't help but giggle.

He really was amazing. It was Shino's first time gaining so much courage from someone.

After laughing for a bit, Shino murmured:

“... You think that someone as boring as me can also do something, Taichi-

senpai?”

“I think that, no matter who it is, if they have the will to do it, there’s nothing they can’t do.”

In other words.

“If they think that they [want to do it], that means they think that they *can* do it, right? If they really can’t do it, they won’t have the idea of [wanting to do it] in the first place, right?”

I-I see! What amazing insight!

Shino felt that she basically understood, she felt that she really understood, and she felt that she truly understood this time.

Right now, she was realizing all over again how wonderful it was that she had joined the Cultural Research Club.

“I... think I can keep going at it.”



“Really? I’m happy if I helped at all.”

A wave of warmth engulfed their surroundings. She would no doubt be happy if she could stay here forever, but she could not. She had to take a step forward.

And then she had to be the one to save Taichi, and Yui too, of course.

“Thank you very much for listening to me, senpai. I have something I have to do no matter what, so I need to leave now.”

Shino bowed respectfully in thanks and turned away from Taichi.

The door was a few meters ahead of her.

I’ll start the instant I step out of that door — Shino convinced herself.

But as she looked away from Taichi and into the world without anyone in her sight, she suddenly felt uneasy.

Could she really do it? If she missed [this time], would it end?

She was a little scared by herself, so Shino decided to ask for some slight assistance.

“... Taichi-senpai, could you please say [Good luck, Shino]?”

Shino requested of Taichi standing behind her.

“Oh, okay... Good luck, Shino.”

“O—K—! Awwwwesome voice!”

Shino took a step forward.

One step, two steps, three steps — four steps.

“Um... I’m not too sure, but you should be a really interesting character, Enjouji-san.”



This time, her [I have to do it this time] was genuine.

... But honestly, she had said this a lot in the past.

Shino kept convincing herself like this, trying to gain power.

But, those versions of [I have to do it this time] had turned into lies every time.

No matter how determined or anticipating she had been, she was unable to change anything.

There were people who kept maintaining their beliefs and actually did reach their goals. Compared to those people, she was clearly a useless person.

A useless person.

A person who was [only] a step behind, bad at school, bad at exercise, couldn't find the trick for anything, was really indecisive, and easily got nervous and failed.

A person like this who indeed had many weaknesses compared to other people, in order to transform [I have to do it this time] into reality, needed — to [act] in order to change their own world.

Changing her own world was not a simple task, so if she were to act, then she needed to act thoroughly.

If she wanted her studies to improve, she needed to study a bit every day.

If she wanted to become better at exercise, she had to exercise a bit every day.

People who were able to act, starting from relatively simple areas then slowly rising to their goals, were truly amazing. Or rather, that was actually the correct method.

But what about people who used that method and were still unable to do it?

Unable to do it, so give up?

No, that kind of thought process was just laughable.

If she didn't change that, if she couldn't change that, then she would act in an overwhelming way that could change everything.

Like only bringing study implements, shutting herself in an area without

connection to the outside.

Like going to the top of a secluded mountain to train, in order to seriously achieve a reckless iron man triathlon.

Like — confronting the one whom she thought was a lie, a dream, and not reality: the superhuman monster <Heartseed>.

What Taichi had told her were mere words. There was no way she could immediately receive some sort of power from those words, and no change would occur in her heart because of them.

If she were only talking about words, about sayings, then up until today she had learnt of sayings from many famous individuals in books or on TV.

But to her, those words were all fake... It was a bit misleading to say that, because she alone was the one who kept changing all those words into fake ones.

Words were only words, just combinations of letters. It was up to her to make them into reality.

This time, she had to make them into reality.

Because this was something someone whom she respected had directly told her.

With this mindset, Shino continued her advance.

Rain began to silently fall from the clouds.

Ignoring the mere droplets of water plunging from above, Shino advanced, her eyes fixated forward.

Perhaps she had once acted before, but that was merely to find Chihiro and negotiate with him. Something easily done if she wanted to do it.

She was more useless compared to other people, and it took her a great amount of courage to do something trivial to normal people, so that was why she felt a sense of achievement even after doing [something trivial].

After getting used to simple obstacles, she would become satisfied after

crossing over even just a relatively weak obstacle, so her body became indolent and idle.

That was wrong. She could not become used to an environment like that.

If people who got used to being lazy tried to change certain things, they needed to act even more dramatically.

That existence had once told her:

If you change your mind, and want to use the power, just come [here]. You can call my name anytime. Then, I'll open an entirely new door for you...

The location was a natural park near the school.

Great. Now come and open that entirely new door.

Change this world.

Change it dramatically.

I will change it.

Shino drew in a deep breath, and let out the loudest voice she had ever uttered in her life.

"COME OUT HERE, <HEARTSEED>!"

She needed only to act dramatically and she could change her world in an instant.

Chapter 7: No Matter When, This World...

As he was walking through the hallway, by chance, he bumped into Kiriya Yui.

She didn't look over — didn't look at Uwa Chihiro, and walked briskly away.

She didn't stop by the Cultural Research Club today either. She'd probably headed straight for the dojo after school.

The current Yui had no memories of the Cultural Research Club. Or, more precisely, she had memories of neither the Cultural Research Club nor Uwa Chihiro himself.

Because she was also acquainted with them outside of the club, Yui still recognized the other second years of the Cultural Research Club, but Chihiro's entire existence had been wiped clean from her mind. Maybe because he himself had been the culprit of this whole incident.

In the few days after Yui and Yaegashi Taichi had lost their memories due to the irresolvable paradox brought about by [Fantasy Projection], Chihiro had profoundly realized his utter powerlessness.

Chihiro had started with nothing. Yet one day after meeting <Heartseed>, he'd received the power of [Fantasy Projection] and basked in triumph, thinking himself overwhelmingly powerful. Sure, he'd vowed never to become complacent because of this, but before he knew it he had somehow already fallen victim to arrogance.

If only it were just that. Even after receiving the power, he became obsessed with the notion of procuring more and more. Desire entangled his feeble willpower and Chihiro sank deeper and deeper, unable to pull himself free.

Then he had committed sins.

Kiriya Yui, who had always been here, was not here anymore.

Yaegashi Taichi, who had always been here, was also not here anymore.

Chihiro destroyed everything those two had received from the Cultural Research Club.

The two who had once been here were now gone. How was this different from murdering them?

Him? As someone who *had*? What a joke. He didn't have the right to discuss such things.

The world was divided into manipulators and non-manipulators. Chihiro had been sure of this.

He was certain that at least *he* should not become a non-manipulator.

But in retrospect he had already been used by <Heartseed>, falling to the level of some non-manipulator. He had considered himself a genius, but in truth, he was merely repugnant livestock that swallowed the feed in front of him without a second thought.

Everyone should stay away from people like me, he thought.

He had also driven away Enjouji Shino, who kept trying to inquire the details.

It was then that Chihiro discovered that <Heartseed> had already contacted people other than himself. To think that he was the chosen one — it was merely delusional, wishful thinking on his part. After realizing that, he felt even more ashamed.

"Oh, Chihiro."

Hearing someone greet him, Chihiro looked up.

It was Aoki Yoshifumi. Chihiro found it inconceivable that he kept running into Cultural Research Club members today.

"You look awful, is everything okay? Dunno whether to call your face pale or muddy..."

Chihiro was completely losing to someone who took him for a fool.

"Hey, I know you're worried about Yui and Taichi too... Sorry, but, basically, you'll have to endure it for a bit. We'll definitely think of something!"

His enemy was sympathizing with him, too.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you again: have you noticed anything strange going on around you lately? Like, someone you know doing weird things, or saying weird stuff...”

Whether he was black or white had always been predetermined for him.

He was pitch black.

“—and stuff like that... Hey? Chihiro?”

“You sure talk a lot, senpai. You can leave me alone, I’m fine.”

“Huh?”

Leaving Aoki with a stupid look on his face, Chihiro returned to his classroom.

He didn’t even see value in living in this world.

“Yo, Uwacchi.”

Shimono, who sat in front of him, turned around and tried to strike up a conversation, but Chihiro said nothing and averted his eyes.

“What’s up? Look at those dark circles around your eyes. You stayed up all night playing games, didn’t you? Have you started playing online games? Those are bad news once you get addicted. Even I’ve blocked them since they’re too dangerous.”

Shimono was yammering unintelligible gibberish. Chihiro decided to ignore him.

“No, huh? Oh, I see. Girl problems. You and Enjouji haven’t been getting along well recently, have you? Or did you find out that she already secretly has a boyfriend, and you’re like, *‘They’ve probably already done it a lot, dammit!’* I get you, man, that super empty feeling.”

“What kind of virgin talk are you guys having?”

Tada chimed in. As the third person to lose at *jankenpon* and forced to volunteer as cheer competition representative, there was an inexplicable magnetism that always seemed to attract him closer to them.

“Shut up, don’t get so cocky just because you’ve done it!”

“Whoa, Shimono, do I look cocky to you? Is this a virgin’s inferiority complex? Scaaary!”

“B-Bastaaard!”

What a peaceful, moronic conversation. Chihiro had always thought them boring, even holding them in contempt, but they now seemed completely out of reach. So far away. Too far away. This was terrible.

Why did he meet that thing?

Why was he bewitched by it?

Why did he accept that kind of power?

Why did he accept his conditions?

Why was he chosen to suffer this unfortunate fate?

“Hey Uwa, I need your input! Even if he has a girlfriend, he’s gotta to be nicer to the single ones, or introduce us to some girls while he’s at it! Come to think of it, have you already reached home base without telling us?! Uwa-san!”

“Shimono aside, at least Uwa’s pretty manly. Wouldn’t be a bad idea to introduce someone to... Uwa?”

Unable to bear it any longer, Chihiro stood up. He could never again partake in these normal conversations.

If he could still laugh in this situation, that would sure be a joke. This was too stupid. Damn.

He left the classroom.

What were Shimono and Tada’s expressions like? How much longer was lunch break? Was it reasonable to leave now? Should he tell them that he was leaving?

He didn’t even know anymore.

Since he didn’t have club activities, Chihiro went straight home after school. He hadn’t been going to the dojo lately either.

Pushing open the door to his room, he tossed his bag onto the bed. It landed on the soft bed with a faint puff, empty.

There was absolutely nothing to do today either. He was only idly wasting away his life.

Chihiro suddenly remembered something and pulled a photo album from his bookshelf. There were several pictures from the Cultural Research Club inside, which he had gotten someone to develop for him. He pulled all of them out and threw them into the trash can. He then lay back down on the bed.

“Chihiro, I’m coming in.”

His mother’s voice came from outside. Annoyed, Chihiro ignored her, but the door opened of its own accord.

“You’re lying down without changing out of your uniform...”

His mother said, concerned. His parents rarely came inside his room at all.

“Chihiro, you’ve been coming home very early these days, don’t you need to go to your club activities? The dojo, too.”

“... It’s fine.”

“Really? You’ve been looking down lately, does it have to do with whatever this is? I think you can manage on your own so I’ve been letting you deal with it yourself, but if there’s something wrong...”

“I don’t, so don’t worry about me.”

So annoying. So goddamn annoying. Normally you don’t give a shit, but now you come running and pretending to be a mother. Shut the hell up if you don’t plan to do anything.

“Well, you say that, but you’ve not been eating properly either...”

So annoying. Get out of my face.

“If you need anything—”

“Leave me alone, just leave!”

“... If you have anything, just say it, okay? Got it? Don’t keep it bottled up.”

His mother admonished him as if she were coaxing a child, and left the room. She didn't know anything at all, but she pretended that she did. He was furious.

Everything was exactly the same the next day, and Chihiro stepped out the front door. He seemed to be a bit later than normal, but he felt as though he left around this time yesterday as well. Has this time become [normal], then? Whatever.

Time passed slowly.

Maybe he was no longer alive, and dead now.

Before he knew it, he had already walked out of school with his bag. School was somehow already over again.

Chihiro was probably the first of the entire school to leave. There was not a single Yamaboshi High School student on the school road.

He was alone.

The summer weather ought to be blistering hot, but Chihiro hugged himself from a chill in his body.

He had been like a criminal on death row since then, spending every day doing nothing.

The surrounding world left him alone, and his days passed ordinarily.

—I hope that, once you join my side, you drop the idea that you can safely return to the original world if you only show me boring things.

Clearly, it was already too late for him to back out completely. No need to doubt that.

What exactly would happen? What would <Heartseed> do to him?

Would his own memories be wiped as well? Would he be forced to do something? Would he be used like equipment? Or would his existence be extinguished entirely?

He was done for.

After making that fatal mistake, his life was done for. He couldn't restart his life; he could only press the "reset" button.

I hope that I'll be naturally lucky in my next life, and that I won't encounter the disaster that is <Heartseed> again. — Chihiro prayed.

Let me reset myself. Delete my current body.

Erase Uwa Chihiro from this world forever — No, no, I don't want to disappear!

"Chihiro-kun."

He heard a clear voice.

It was a voice like that of a goddess.

A voice he had longed for entered Chihiro's ear.

A miracle?

A miracle.

This was a miracle.

Suppressing the urge to scream, Chihiro turned his head around.

A petite girl, her chestnut hair gleaming, her radiant smile exuding a brilliant warmth.

Kiriyama Yui stood there.

"... Yui... san?"

"Are you leaving now?"

Yui asked with an expression as warm as springtime wind.

She stared into Chihiro's eyes, confirming Uwa Chihiro's existence.

As if time had turned back to before he had stupidly failed.

"N-... Um, Yui-san...? Have you regained your memories?"

"Y-Yeah... after a lot of twists and turns. You have got to properly explain to me what is going on. I have the right to know, don't I?"

He ought to be very scared of and reject the idea of explaining, but now it didn't matter. He could escape from hell, not needing to fear his own crimes again, and didn't need to disappear — what more could he have hoped for? Chihiro desired nothing else.

“Got it...” Chihiro replied, and Yui invited him: “Why don't we continue this in the clubroom?”

“I know that this is all the handiwork of <Heartseed>. It's all his fault. And by the way, we've already driven him away, so you don't need to worry.”

They were in Room 401 of the club building, the clubroom of the Cultural Research Club. Although he had not been here in some time, the clubroom was still wide open for Chihiro.

“I didn't think that the problem would be solved so easily. Everything up till now seems like one big dream.” Chihiro mumbled, and Yui replied, “Yup, it really does seem like a dream. Chihiro-kun hasn't done anything wrong, so that's why you should tell me absolutely everything, from the beginning.”

Seem like a dream. Hearing her say this, Chihiro suddenly realized something. That guy's existence and the phenomena he incited were impossible after all, it was all just a dream... If he thought of it that way, he seemed to feel a huge weight lifting from his back.

Words and sentences tumbled from his mouth.

“The day I decided to join the Cultural Research Club, I met <Heartseed> in Gotou's body at the nature park. He told me that he was only greeting me that time.”

“A few days later, he showed me an unbelievable power and asked if I was interested.”

“He said that he'd give me the ability to make the second years of the Cultural Research Club see illusions and that, in return, I had to make those five people more interesting. If I did it well, he'd give me even more power. I was completely hooked.”

“I thought that my life, which wasn’t that bad to begin with, could be dramatically changed with this mysterious power. I wanted to make this horribly dull world more interesting. I wanted power.”

“It went really well at first. But things got more and more difficult later on.”

“Since it wasn’t going well, <Heartseed> blamed me and threatened me. I couldn’t help it, so I used my power more often, causing situations, but as you all see, it all backfired on me.”

“So I panicked, my mind weakened, and as a result, I caused an irresolvable paradox by mistake... then Yui-san and Taichi-san lost their memories... I’m really very sorry.”

“I was truly helpless... I lost myself, and couldn’t control my power...”

Inexplicably, Chihiro couldn’t stop talking, and even ended up exposing his heartfelt emotions.

Yui nodded, listening to him quietly.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Yui inquired when Chihiro’s monologue was about to end.

“It’s a bit late for this, Chihiro-kun, but why did you decide to join the Cultural Research Club?”

Chihiro was a bit surprised. Why was she asking this now? But it couldn’t hurt to respond... Hm, why, indeed? He had never seriously considered the reason behind his decision. Perhaps he could say that he was pressured by the circumstances... But before he could organize his thoughts, Chihiro’s mouth moved on its own.

It was as if his true feelings were exposed.

“Because I felt that there was something I’ve always wanted here, yet could never quite get ahold of...”

—Really?

Those words were his [honest feelings]—?

Chihiro was a little embarrassed. This atmosphere was bad. He was going to

let everything slip out.

“Is it because... there’s someone you like?”

Yui tossed this question forward, her expression unchanged.

His heart began to pound relentlessly. What? What does that mean?

Just as Chihiro froze, Yui shook her head: “Ah, forget I asked.” *No one asked!* Chihiro complained regretfully in his heart, but he said nothing.

“I sorta understand now. Thank you for telling me about this.”

“Ah, it’s nothing...”

Had he said too much? Chihiro began to feel uneasy. His confession had included a lot of extreme detail, but Yui hadn’t gotten angry at all, so Chihiro had accidentally told her everything.

But Yui didn’t look even slightly unhappy. It should be fine, right?

“Can you wait a moment for me, then?”

Yui said as she stood up. Was she going to the restroom?

Watching Yui’s departing figure, Chihiro’s mind suddenly realized something strange.

According to Yui, Taichi should have recovered his memory as well.

Taichi and the others would likely be very keen to find out the details of this incident, so why was Yui asking him alone? It felt a bit off.

She pushed the door open, stepped outside, and closed the clubroom door.

After a moment, the door suddenly opened again.

Enjouji Shino stood outside.

Her expression was a mixture of apology and pity.

“I’m sorry, Chihiro-kun.”

Enjouji Shino said in a small voice.

Chihiro didn't know what she meant. What was with the sudden appearance and apology?

Wait, where did Yui go?

She'd left for less than two seconds before the door immediately opened again. These two should have bumped into each other...

—I'm sorry, Chihiro-kun.

... It can't be. Chihiro shook his head.

But Enjouji was apologizing, the door had only closed for a moment before opening. No matter how he thought about it, it had been the same person who had closed and opened the door, but Enjouji was standing outside now.

And, like Chihiro, Enjouji had also encountered <Heartseed>.

All of this pointed towards a single answer; every theory came out to one conclusion.

In other words...

This meant...

"You probably already understand... That Yui-senpai just now, was me. I used the power that <Heartseed> gave me."

He had been played.

He had been played. By Enjouji.

And he had revealed everything.

"Heh, heheheh... AHA, AHA, AHAHAHAHAHA, HAHAHAHA!!"

For some reason, Chihiro wanted to laugh and began laughing loudly. Something in his heart dropped, slowly falling.

His malice, his crimes, his pettiness, his spite. All had been revealed to the world.

Of course Kiriya Yui and Yaegashi Taichi's memories hadn't been restored in this world.

The other person had used the criminal's own power against him to get

himself to turn himself in on a silver platter.

He'd joined the Cultural Research Club because of something he wanted here? What kind of idiotic bilge was that. He was an enemy who had attacked the Cultural Research Club, and since he was an enemy, how could he be forgiven?

It was time to quit dreaming and realize the truth. Having hope at a time like this was purely wishful thinking. He had nowhere to run.

His only option really was — to disappear.

The instant this notion flashed by in his mind, Chihiro shoved Enjouji aside from the door and took off.

Without any goal whatsoever, Chihiro sprinted down the street.

He gradually grew breathless and had to slow to a walk. Sweat poured down his head like a waterfall and his shirt stuck to his skin.

He walked onto a bustling street in front of the train station. Chihiro's eyes were immediately drawn to the karaoke bar, the fast food restaurant, the pub, and others in a messy flood of signs.

In the evening after school, there were many students strolling around downtown, probably preparing to have some fun after class. Other than them, there were quite a lot of people of different kinds: a young man wearing a formal suit despite the stifling heat, a middle-aged housewife walking back from grocery shopping, a young girl in trendy getup, and a foreign couple.

A space filled with people, people, people, people, people, people, people, people.

Fortunately, there weren't any Yamaboshi High School students around, and Chihiro exhaled. He really did not want anyone he knew to see this haggard appearance of his. There weren't any students from his school around, but was this... was this real?

Enjouji could have used [Fantasy Projection] again. She could become anyone.

In other words, anyone around him could be Enjouji Shino.

She probably wouldn't have chased him all the way here — but she could have.

The hundreds of people he saw all seemed normal, but it was possible that one of them was an imposter. Anyone here could be the fake. Real or fake, virtual or actual, there was no way he could tell.

This meant that everyone was an imposter.

Now he was trapped within the cage of [Fantasy Projection].

The instant he realized this, everyone around him seemed to don masks.

A man smiled at Chihiro.

What do you want? Who are you?

Chihiro stood stock-still, and someone bumped into him from behind. A woman clicked her tongue, then walked around him.

The only ones capable of [Fantasy Projection] should be himself and Enjouji. But if even Enjouji could use it, it wouldn't be strange for other people to get the power as well.

A female high school student in uniform was staring unceasingly at Chihiro, whispering to a girl beside her.

A group of young men walked towards him. They scattered in the street, as though to surround him.

How could this be? No, but, he was—

He was being watched.

He was being attacked.

The entire world saw him as an enemy.

Chihiro found that it was only possible to think of this, so he ran away.

Running was the only thing he could do.

He couldn't live in such a horrifying world.

Chihiro fled into the nature park.

He wanted a place with no people, but went deep into the park by mistake. Chihiro immediately collapsed into a dilapidated bench, apathetic to the state of his clothes.

He was tired. He didn't want to move. He'd had enough.

But finally, a little peace and quiet.

He felt great by himself. Although he disliked being alone, now he wanted solitude.

There was no one around him, so he wasn't afraid to use [Fantasy Projection].

Chihiro now fervently believed that the five upperclassmen of the Cultural Research Club, who could live peacefully even under the attacks of the phenomena, were practically monsters.

It must have been quite some time since the last renovation. His surroundings were a mass of disrepair. The desolate atmosphere suited him quite well, so Chihiro decided that this would be his final resting place.

This was where everything had started: the nature park where he had met <Heartseed> several times. He would sometimes appear suddenly, but if he gave Chihiro time to think, he would tell him, "*Come here when you've decided*". Even if Chihiro didn't contact him beforehand, as long as he arrived, <Heartseed> would be there all the same. How exactly was he meeting him so perfectly every time? Was Gotou in cahoots with him after all?

And now, what was <Heartseed> doing at this moment?

Since Chihiro was already here, then that guy would probably show up too.

<Heartseed> would come.

... Ah, well, this wasn't bad.

What kind of ending had <Heartseed> prepared for him? He, who had abandoned his contract?

Would his life meet its end with <Heartseed>?

If it was happening anyway, he didn't really mind.

Very exhausted. Felt like taking a nap. Hadn't been sleeping properly as of

late.

That day, Chihiro did not return home.



When he awoke the next morning, Chihiro felt waves of painful cramps all over his body. The bench was too rigid after all.

The space surrounded by trees felt slightly chilly in the morning. A stray dog passed by, eyed him, then quickly turned around and scurried elsewhere.

Chihiro swiveled his neck, relaxing his muscles as his head gradually cleared. He was lucky to even be able to spend the night in this kind of place.

What time was it? About six in the morning? He could find out by simply flipping open his phone, but he really didn't want to turn it on just to see the messages that had accumulated last night. Chihiro had told his occasionally-concerned mother that he was sleeping over at a friend's place, so there shouldn't be anything serious going on.

It was Saturday, so he didn't need to worry about school.

Just as he was spacing out, the sun slowly rose.

Now what? What was the situation now?

There was no doubt that Enjouji had told Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki what he had done. Besides, there was no way that Enjouji had come up with yesterday's stunt by herself. Inaba probably told her to do it. Did this mean that they now saw him as nothing more than an enemy? Chihiro had gone unexposed until yesterday, but he was now a wanted criminal.

Maybe a real criminal would have it better. Even if he committed a crime, as long as he were sentenced under law and obediently accepted his punishment, then at least he could be reborn. But he, having committed a crime outside of law, might not even be allowed redemption.

What if he simply denied it?

I don't know. I don't understand. What's <Heartseed>? If he could keep playing dumb like that until it all blew over... Could he do it? Could he really live with the shame?

Then, there was only one option left.

Disappear.

After all, hadn't he always thought this world to be horribly dull? Since he was so powerless, even if he knew his place and carried on, he'd only be suited for a muddling, perfunctory life.

No duties.

No accomplishments.

This world was horribly dull.

This world was done for.

Even if he lived on, there would be no light in this world.

So it didn't matter.

He was already drifting along in this finished world like a sloth. Why not end it sooner?

He'd been walking the path of the baddies, but in the end, he'd still go out with an explosion, like a massive firework.

"Heh heh... Heh... Heheheheh..."

A great, big, ugly firework. Was that all that was left? His life would end, just like this.

End end end end end end end end end end *die*...

"I've *fiiiiinally* found you, Chihiro-kun."

The voice coming from behind was unusually chirpy.

"I've f-finally found you! I don't know how long I've been searching since yesterday... So you were in the nature park after all... Good grief, do you know

how many times I called and messaged you? At least reply!”

Enjouji barged into Chihiro’s sight. She looked excited, as though her mind were unusually clear from not sleeping all night. Chihiro thought it was kind of funny.

“Ah, you’re laughing at me! Why are you laughing? I couldn’t find Chihiro-kun *anywhere*, I even called your house!”

“... Hey, why do you care?”

Chihiro couldn’t help but interrupt. He hadn’t spoken for a long while; his voice cracked for a moment.

“W-Well, I couldn’t help it. Ah, your mom answered the phone and asked me, ‘Isn’t he staying over at his friend’s house? May I ask who you are?’ I could only tell her that I was Chihiro-kun’s girlfriend, and that I was fighting with you because I was jealous... She seemed to buy it.”

“Make this all a little more troublesome, why don’t you?”

Where did she get this kind of drive and impulse from? It couldn’t be the normal Enjouji... An imposter!

“What do you think of Taichi-san’s voice?”

“Sexy and mature, but not without the sparkle of youth. — My tentative review of Taichi-senpai’s dulcet tones! I’m accepting objections! Limited to compliments, however!”

Judging by her perverted voice-fetish, this was Enjouji all right. She was even more passionate than before.

But what was this? He’d fled here alone because he was afraid to be near anyone else, yet now he was talking normally to someone, and moreover, it was Enjouji, who knew of his crimes.

When Enjouji had arrived, his thoughts of being done for or wanting to disappear had vaporized. He couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“Whoo... Anyway, it’s good that you’re okay... I was like, ‘You don’t know where you’re running... You’ll die if you aren’t careful...’ That sentence doesn’t count! Forget it! That’s way too unlucky!”

“... Why in the world would you want to find someone like me? You can’t have searched for the entire night...”

“I went home when it got real late.”

In other words, she went searching for me late into the night?

“... What do you want from me, then?”

Even if he wanted to be alone, he needed to let Enjouji finish her business... Couldn’t be helped.

Enjouji looked down at Chihiro on the bench, and sucked in a deep breath.

“Chihiro-kun, come with me. Let’s go... apologize to our senpais.”

Ahh, so those guys sent her after all?

“Hell no.”

“There we go, thanks. You may be a little hesitant, but since I called you desperately, ran all over the place, searched for you late into the night, and came to look for you first thing in the morning, you must be deeply moved... Huh? You *don’t* want to come with me?”

My god, shut up, just finish this subject.

“Everything’s already over and done with, what good will my apology do?”

“It’s... it’s not over! Wh-what’s over?”

“... It’s over, isn’t it? Yui-san and Taichi-san have lost their memories, and after you snitched on me, they all know that I was behind it...”

“No, I didn’t tell them... But you already told them, haven’t you?”

“H-Hell no!”

I can’t believe it, but it doesn’t look like she’s lying.

“Are you saying that after you deceived me by yourself, you’re coming to find me by yourself too?”

“Uh-huh, yeah.”

That petite, weak, stupid Enjouji, she, by herself —

"... I really did try very hard. I went to find <Heartseed> and begged him to do something, but he didn't even explain anything to me, told me to figure it out on my own, and gave me the power to impersonate other people..."

Chihiro was even more stunned. Enjouji had not possessed her power from the beginning after all. She saw the tragedy Chihiro had created and ran directly to negotiate with <Heartseed> in order to break the stalemate.

Chihiro asked Enjouji when she had discovered <Heartseed>'s existence, and learned that she had found out about it at the same time as he had. He had agreed to the deal for power back then, but Enjouji had declined. From then on, the two of them had walked different paths.

"I... was lured by power..."

Although it was too late to say so, Chihiro felt nothing but regret for wallowing in desire at the time.

"I'm just... a coward, nothing more."

Enjouji mumbled. For just that instant, she seemed to have changed back into her usual weak, useless self.

"But even if I am a coward, I also feel... that it's wrong to do nothing. I clearly felt something happen back then, but I didn't do anything. Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai became like that because of me..."

"What do you mean, 'because of me'?"

You feel guilty just at this level?

"I was a bystander, when I was really also partly the culprit."

By that logic, what did that make him? He, the complete, utter culprit?

Chihiro suddenly grew impatient. He wanted to hit someone. He didn't want to cooperate with Enjouji anymore.

"... So, what then? What happens after we go and explain the long and short of it to them, then apologize?"

"Uhh... Um..."

"What can we do then? Can we solve anything? I don't think so!"

Just by Chihiro probing her, Enjouji suddenly looked as though he had said something far worse. She was so easy to read.

"Y-You're not w-wrong... But if we discuss this with the senpais, maybe we can find some clues. <Heartseed> said before that they've already experienced many of these incidents. If we just tell them everything and work together..."

"Are you saying that if everyone discusses this all friendly-like, we can work something out?"

How idealistic. This world wasn't that reasonable, that simple. Chihiro was already familiar with this to the point of repugnance.

"But..."

Enjouji hung her head, looking to be on the verge of tears.

This development again?

She seemed to be somewhat determined, but the embers of her passion were much too weak and would disappear in a wisp of smoke with just one breath. This filled Chihiro with rage. If you couldn't do it in the beginning, then you shouldn't bite off more than you can chew, you shouldn't have so much hope — these words could apply to his past self as well.

If a nobody tried to dabble in unrealistic dreams, they were only heading toward a tragic ending.

So he had to stop her, to prevent this from becoming a disaster...

Enjouji looked up, her expression firm, full of determination.

"We have to do something. We have to take action. We have to change."

Chihiro didn't get a chance to interrupt.

Ahh, I see how it is.

"I will change myself, and I will fight hard to the end; I can absolutely fix this situation."

Had Enjouji already changed? Already stepped into *that* world?

Thinking about waking her up before something bad happened, now that was stupid.

He wasn't that altruistic. He just didn't want to be abandoned.

Chihiro noticed his own attempts to justify himself, and his own weak state that was becoming rude and impulsive.

Sucked into the Cultural Research Club as he was, Enjouji had a personality similar to his. The two of them were birds of a feather.

But right now, Chihiro was forced to realize the definite difference between them.

Enjouji Shino had stepped onto the righteous path.

Uwa Chihiro had been led astray.

If she could head towards there, he really wished that she could have told him earlier; if it were going to end like this, he wished so much that she could have warned him. That way, maybe he, too, just maybe, could also — "So, Chihiro-kun."

Enjouji, on the righteous path, called the name of Chihiro, led astray.

"Let's fight together."

She hoped.

"... Fight together?"

Why did she need him? She shouldn't need him at all.

"I'll try hard too, but I need your strength. So, let's work hard together!"

She needed him.

"You talk about working hard, and you didn't really do anything bad. That doesn't matter, but I'm the main culprit! How do you expect me to have the nerve to 'work hard'?!"

Ahh, what the hell am I saying? It's like I actually want to give it a go.

No, that's it, isn't it? That's probably really it.

It seemed like something similar had happened before. His mouth had betrayed his true feelings before his brain could react.

Hearing Chihiro's shouts, Enjouji hesitated for a moment, as though perplexed

over whether she should have said all of that.

Then, Chihiro noticed something.

He was anticipating Enjouji's reply. He saw hope.

There was a savior. Someone willing to save him. Someone who *could* save him.

Even if this world was utterly boring, even if this world was completely meaningless, even if this world was done for, no matter how fucked up this world was — he didn't want it all to end now, he didn't want to disappear like this! Even if he was splitting hairs over the matter, that's how it was!

That's why Chihiro believed Enjouji and entrusted his hope to her, waiting for her rescue and well-wishes.

"T-The enemy changing his ways and becoming your partner... p-pretty passionate, isn't it?"

How he wished he could have said that with a straight face. Since he was embarrassed himself, he made that hackneyed phrase sound even colder, and the scene suddenly cooled. If he wasn't used to this, then he shouldn't have tried to show off.

Come to think of it, things had been going stupidly since the beginning. What the hell were they doing?

"Um, uhh... I've done bad things too. It'd be too arrogant of me to talk about working hard... What's done is done and you can't change the past, but if I still do nothing because of that, I'll only become even worse. If I know that it's not okay, then I need to change, starting now."

Change, starting now... But with things the way they were, how would he change his path?

"If we can just get back their memories, we won't become even worse... Probably."

Was there still the possibility that he wasn't going to become even worse?

How much more did he want Enjouji to say? What did he want her to say?

He'd already decided what he wanted to do.

Chihiro wanted to fight.

He wanted to join the losers' counterattack.

Even if his crimes wouldn't disappear, Chihiro still wanted to redeem himself.

And, if possible, he wanted to return to the beginning.

He couldn't lie to himself about not wanting to return.

"I went through a lot to meet <Heartseed>, just for you, Chihiro-kun!"

She emphasized a strange point.

"So what? I don't know how many times I've met him."

"D-Don't say that! You'll make my effort look like nothing!"

Enjouji was genuinely upset. She really was amusing.

Chihiro pushed against the bench and stood up.

Watching him stand up, Enjouji's expression brightened. He hadn't said anything yet!

"Well, it seems like... I'd better apologize and explain."

"H-Hooray! Thank you!"

Enjouji threw her arms up in delight. Her movements were very stiff; she was clearly not used to expressing happiness. Had she ever been this joyful in her entire life?

"I... can change Chihiro-kun, I... can change..."

Chihiro had no way of knowing Enjouji's personal situation, but had he really changed? He didn't know.

"... Do you want to change, Enjouji?"

"Yep, one day... I want to become like our senpais."

Enjouji discussed her dream with a radiant smile. With the way she was now, Chihiro could no longer deny its plausibility because she had slowly but surely taken action.

Compared to her, he... Well, he needed to make amends first. He'd forget about whether or not he would be forgiven for now, because if he didn't resolve the problem right in front of him there was no way he could continue.

No matter the punishment, Chihiro was willing to take it. Even if it involved him getting beat up.

Once he became determined to accept punishment, a huge burden lifted off his shoulders and he felt much better. Maybe what he had been missing all along was the courage to admit his wrongdoing. He had kept trying to dodge punishment, but was instead forced into a dead end.

Take it like a man, that was what he needed — the correct answer.

Even Enjouji had changed so much; maybe he could change as well.

A bastard who had been led astray because of <Heartseed> could also take step after step towards the righteous path.

And then, Chihiro wanted to become someone he himself revered.

Although it was Saturday, the two of them still decided to ask Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki to come out. Since it was a bit much to have them come in uniform, they decided to meet in a park near school.

Chihiro and Enjouji stood at the meeting point as twenty minutes passed in dead silence. At some point, neither of them dared to move; both stood utterly stock-still, their legs growing stiff.

"*Ahem!*"

Enjouji cleared her throat twice. Chihiro turned, only to see her face pale.

"Hey, are you all right?"

"I'm O-OK! Everything's, fine... *Uhguu...*"

She slapped a hand over her mouth as though she were about to throw up.

"Uh, you don't look fine. Why don't you go and rest somewhere?"

"That's not saying much coming from someone whose face is so white he looks near death."

"That's another matter..."

She was really pushing it. But was his own face really that white?

"W-Will they go off on us? Um... I think they will."

Enjouji's words solidified the source of their unease and made Chihiro realize this problem.

"Going off" was too soft of a description, she should have used something more intense.

"Wasn't this your idea? And you had to call them out right now."

How was *he* cheering *her* up now? Role reversal.

"But... Ah!"

The casually clothed trio walked towards them.

Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki walked shoulder to shoulder. They couldn't have bumped into each other by chance here; they probably met up somewhere else beforehand. What were they discussing amongst themselves?

Their expressions were not kind, but not overly stern.

What did he look like to those three now? Chihiro tried to imagine but felt scared, so he quickly flung the image away from his mind.

Chihiro wanted to run far, far away, right now.

In this type of situation, those people would only express hatred and loathing. It was frightening. Chihiro wanted very much to run.

He wanted very much to run, did he?

Chihiro looked to his side and saw Enjouji trembling, clenching her fists. Her lips were pressed tightly together, eyes brimming with tears, but she didn't run, instead looking bravely ahead.

Enjouji was trying really hard.

So how could he leave her and flee?

He would never run away before she did. He couldn't lose to her, absolutely not. So before that, he had to endure, endure, endure it.

Enjouji occasionally cut in, but the explanation was mostly Chihiro's doing.

"—And that's how it is."

As he explained, Chihiro felt himself becoming paler and paler.

Enjouji's tensionless tone numbed him, and he somehow misread the severity of the situation. It was easy to say it, but they had to actually do so — although they thought so at the beginning, in retrospect, it was absurd; this was no longer a matter of whether they were forgiven or not.

The trio's expressions didn't change: they occasionally closed their eyes and lowered their heads in contemplation, listening to Chihiro talk.

Their unchanging faces added to his unease. Enjouji looked to be feeling the same, her body shaking without end.

"I... I'm really very sorry!"

Chihiro's knees sank to the ground of their own accord and he prostrated himself in apology. Humans would naturally kneel down in situations like these, Chihiro thought in an inexplicably impartial manner.

Taking the punishment, edging closer to the righteous path, to go back to normal?

Boundaries for how carefree he could be existed. The more heinous the crime, the less likely he was to receive a second chance.

"I-I'm sorry... Um, I couldn't... do anything either!"

Enjouji dropped down too, her voice becoming sobs.

No one spoke. The air was filled only with Enjouji's nonstop sniffing.

It was the longest seconds in a lifetime.

"Hey, you two."

Inaba spoke first.

He had destroyed the love she had for her boyfriend and everything between them, creating an irreversible situation. So, whatever she was planning to do to

him, it wouldn't be out of the question.

"The hell are you playing at?! Stop kidding around, you moooooorons!"

Her voice was loud enough to rupture his eardrums. Every fiber of her being flew into a rage, but yeah, he couldn't blame her.

He'd already prepared himself, but he recoiled, unable to move upon being faced with her outrage. Nagase and Aoki's eyes overlooking him felt as though he were sitting on a bed of pins and needles.

If only he had never started this whole twisted thing, if only he had never met Yui.

If only he had never been here—

Guilt gushed forth, assailing Chihiro.

He felt as if guilt would completely consume him... He wanted nothing more than swift, severe judgment.

"Stand up, Shino."

Inaba took Enjouji's hand and helped her up.

"Look up, Chihiro."

Chihiro gingerly lifted his head. Inaba's face was right in front of his eyes. Chihiro shut them in fright.

"You bastaaaarrrd! —Take this!"

Thwack!

Something tiny and rigid struck his head.

"Ow!"

Chihiro opened his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

He'd been... flicked on the forehead?

"Get up and dust yourself off, Chihiro! You too, Shino!"

"... Whuh? What... Huh?"

Inaba ignored the dumbfounded Chihiro and helped pat the sand from his

clothing.

"Oh! That's good, for a second I thought that Inaban was really gonna lose it! You okay, Shino-chan?"

Nagase sidled up to Enjouji and patted down her clothes.

Enjouji also looked confused:

"Eh? U-Um, seriously?"

Their upperclassmen's reactions were completely unexpected. No matter how much they punished him, it wouldn't have been out of the question. But he was only scolded and flicked on the forehead. That was it?

"Shino, you haven't done anything wrong. Chihiro, I can't help but reprimand you a little, but you're not in trouble either."

Inaba declared.

Chihiro, though he hadn't revealed everything, had exposed the worst of his inner thoughts and told them that none of it was out of his own control, but that rather, Chihiro had lost to his selfish, feeble heart. This much was obvious, so why was he free of guilt?

Then Nagase spoke up:

"We are the ones... who must apologize. We clearly knew of that lowest being in the world <Heartseed>, but we kept you in the dark and invited you to the club..."

"Ah! In any case, it's killing me to stand around like this, so let's go find somewhere to sit down."

Aoki quipped. He led the way as all five of them shifted positions slightly, and each took a seat in a playset or beside a flower bed.

Then, Inaba and the others explained to Chihiro and Shino the relationship between <Heartseed> and the Cultural Research Club. It seemed that the relationship between them ran deeper than Chihiro had imagined.

"In any case, we clearly knew that we would be involving you, but we still invited you to join the club. Although you weren't involved in the worst possible

scenario we could imagine, you were still dragged into this weird situation. We apologize.”

As Inaba bowed her head in apology, Nagase and Aoki also said “Sorry”, “I’m sorry”, and apologized.

“No... You don’t need to apologize, senpais...”

Enjouji looked terrified, and Chihiro helped smooth things over:

“That is... No matter how you look at it, the guilty ones are myself and <Heartseed>...”

“That’s right, Chihhi, <Heartseed> is the guilty one! So you don’t need to blame yourself too much!”

The instigator of everything was that guy in the shadows, so it was pointless for them to argue like this — this was Inaba and the others’ position.

“It’s just that, some things did indeed anger me.”

Inaba’s tone of voice changed.

Ahh, so he was going to be punished after all...

“I say, you guys... if it stressed you out that much, why didn’t you tell us? That’s got to be the most basic thing you can do!”

“I know, right? We really want you to depend on us, your senpais, more!”

“Inaba-chan, lori-chan, you’re not wrong, but—”

The three second years chatted around like always.

What was going on?

This was too much; he was much lesser than they. They were actually able to take those kinds of actions and forgive them as though they hadn’t done anything at all?

Even if the most basic culprit was <Heartseed>, even if it was because of the Cultural Research Club second years that they came into contact with him, could such actions truly be forgiven? He, at least, couldn’t do that.

“B-But... Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai...”

Hearing Enjouji say this, Nagase and Aoki's expressions suddenly froze.

But after a moment, their frozen faces thawed.

Inaba spoke first:

"No worries. No matter when, us five got through those phenomena together. Although those two weren't able to fight with us this time, similar situations have happened before. This time is no different..."

Aoki continued her sentence:

"That is, it's not just us this time, but Shino and Chihiro as well! In other words, that's us five! As long as we five are together, we're unstoppable!"

And Nagase finished:

"Well said, Aoki! Let's work together, everyone, and win again!"

She grinned widely.

What was going on? What the hell was going on? What the hell was this?

Chihiro had already prepared himself for justice, but he'd merely rushed at thin air. If it ended just like this, it only forced him to realize the crushing differences between them.

Chihiro thought he had understood, but with reality right in front of him, his heart remained perpetually frustrated.

A problem that stressed the hell out of him wasn't even worth mentioning to these guys.

He wanted to become like them? Impossible.

Before these gods, no matter how much he, an imposter, tried to show off, it was all a joke. He was simply being forced to realize that no matter how hard he tried, an imposter was still an imposter.

Chihiro noticed that he was always evasive, but he discovered that when he plucked up the courage to admit his wrongdoings and steeled himself to take it like a man, he was facing an crushingly towering precipice.

Chihiro knew that his upperclassmen had already reached a certain realm. He was clearly envious of them, but had never observed them closely, merely

imagining hazily and thinking that he understood.

Right now, it was Chihiro's first time facing this precipice.

He had absolutely no way of climbing it.

Just by looking at those three, Chihiro felt as though the world were discarding him, as though they were saying to him: *You can stay over there for the rest of your life.*

"... By the way, we've decided amongst ourselves that you guys'll help. Is that okay?"

Nagase asked, restoring her serious expression.

Help?

Where did they need his help? What use would he fulfill? Chihiro thought, but said nothing.

The silence continued for a while. *See, Enjouji is the same way—*

"O-Of course! I-I'll do all I can to help everyone!"

"Great, thank you, Shino-chan!"

Nagase grinned, as Inaba and Aoki smiled too. Enjouji beamed, and the atmosphere became peacefully warm.

Really? Enjouji is already on that side? She was once in Chihiro's shoes, but Enjouji probably possessed that kind of aptitude from the very beginning. She had an honest personality, after all, and her soul seemed quite pure.

If these prerequisites didn't exist, it might it have been impossible to explain why only Enjouji had suddenly changed?

"Chi, Chihiro-kun... can we?"

Enjouji asked, glancing fearfully at him.

Chihiro was already unable to see her as a partner any longer.

He was alone here.

"... It makes sense, I'll... help too."

Chihiro agreed; the current atmosphere didn't permit a "no" anyway.

“Well then, we should think in detail about how to handle this, but there isn’t anything we can write with. Let’s head home first, change into uniform, and meet in the clubroom.”

Inaba suggested, and Aoki and Nagase immediately responded:

“Got it, Inaba!”

“All right, there’s no stopping now! Full steam ahead today and tomorrow! When school starts on Monday, we’ll charge even faster!”

“I, I... will do my best, too!”

Enjouji also was filled with enthusiasm.

Just as everyone was about to step away, Nagase added:

“Oh, right, we really need everyone’s strength to solve this problem now, and that’s why we asked for your help. But after all of this blows over, you can leave the Cultural Research Club if you want.”

They’d already thought about what would happen afterwards, and remembered to think of them, too; this completely surpassed Chihiro’s line of reasoning.

The five of them started home all at once.

Chihiro walked with the others for a bit, but since his route was different from everyone else’s, he said goodbye to them on the way.

Inaba, Nagase, Aoki, and Enjouji gradually drifted far away from him.

Now alone, Chihiro dropped shakily to his knees.

He no longer had the strength to stand and fight.

“I don’t think... I can go on...”

Chihiro thought it would be okay if he could at least receive his punishment. That way, maybe he could have closure in his heart, bid his current self farewell, and be born again.

Even though Chihiro had taken it like a man, he’d only experienced despair, let alone found escape.

The world would not change.

He couldn't do it today. He couldn't bring himself to do anything.

No, Chihiro understood that he had things that he absolutely had to do, important matters that had to be attended to, and though he couldn't do it now, he had to do it. So, yes — he'd begin working tomorrow.

Even when the meeting time came, Chihiro did not leave for the clubroom.



Sunday came and went, followed by Monday, and the athletics festival was only a week away.

He felt dead for the entirety of yesterday, and still felt terrible upon waking up this morning.

Utterly terrible. He was supposed to meet everyone in the clubroom on Saturday, but Chihiro had left them out to dry. On Sunday, too, the Cultural Research Club seemed to have some kind of activity, but Chihiro had failed to participate.

After missing the first opportunity, he was even more scared of going to the second. The difficulty of it had increased far too much, and it was already too late — his whole body was bound by such thoughts.

No, it wasn't that. He hadn't gone for a specific reason. Chihiro had been losing sleep, spent a night outside, and had ruined his health. His body ached and he couldn't put on any weight... he didn't have a fever, though.

They'd understand if he properly explained that to them, right? They were definitely willing to forgive something even worse, so it'd be okay, right?

But could he bring himself to ask them to let him join now? Where would he get that kind of courage?

Why hadn't he taken action that day? Why did he think it would be fine if he

did nothing?

From the bottom of his heart, Chihiro despised what he did back then.

Although he was afraid even to go to school, his body still automatically prepared itself. Chihiro had always held in contempt those types of mindless drones who knew only how to go with the flow, but he was actually one of them.

When he left the house in the morning, his mother, specifically coming to the vestibule to see him off, had said: “By the way you look, it seems that your problem still isn’t resolved, so you need to really talk about it with your girlfriend.”

Apparently, Enjouji had pulled an intensely bizarre excuse with his mother.

“Uh, that was...”

“Sometimes both sides can be too emotional, so there’s no harm in spending some time away from each other, is there?”

She was actually spiritedly making suggestions.

“Hey, listen to me...”

“When you guys make up, you can bring her home as a guest... But ah, if it gets out of hand, just cool down for a while and find another girl. You’re high school students anyway, so even if you have as many relationships as you want —”

Since it was too much to deal with, he decided to ignore her and leave the vestibule.

After arriving at the classroom, Chihiro immediately scanned the scene, discovered that Enjouji had not arrived yet, and exhaled.

“Uwa.”

Shimono, sitting in front of him, pointed at Chihiro’s bag with his mechanical pencil.

“... What’s up with my bag? Huh?... You want me to put my bag on the table and open it?”

Although he couldn't understand him, Chihiro did as he was prompted anyway.

Shimono quickly pulled something wrapped in a paper bag from his own bag and stuffed it into Chihiro's.

What was he doing? Astonished, Chihiro peered at the contents of the paper bag —

“Hey, stop! Don't take it out here!”

—There was a cover almost completely plastered with the color of human flesh; a so-called [porno].

“... The hell are you trying to do... Hey!”

Just as Chihiro was getting more and more suspicious, Tada, who had just arrived, came near Chihiro's seat.

“Hm? Oh, Tada, listen, I just gave Uwa a wonderful present.”

“Really, well then... I suppose I'll need to give him a present too? Uwa, let's hang out together sometime. Although we haven't decided on a date yet, there'll be girls involved.”

“Wh-what the hell is that 'present'?! That's no longer just a present!”

Shimono reacted before Chihiro could.

“Anyway... Why are you guys giving me stuff? It's not my birthday or some kind of holiday.”

“How do I put it? Because you've been looking really down lately. But it's already good that you can talk normally like this.”

Hearing Tada say that, Shimono continued, grinning: “Indeed, you were pretty bad for a while.”

“Are you guys... comforting me?”

“Don't say it out loud, it's embarrassing.”

“Maybe we are.”

Why were they suddenly doing this for him? What good did it do? What was

their goal?

“So Shimono’s giving me a movie... and Tada’s giving me a real girl...”

“You don’t need to criticize even that, do you?! I feel empty too!”

“Hahaha, not bad, Uwa.”

Tada chuckled at Chihiro’s quip.

Chihiro suddenly realized that he, too, was entering the circle of laughter, and very naturally at that.

It was much too natural, much too simple.

He’d obviously been abandoned by the world, but what now?

A warm atmosphere surrounded Chihiro.

Were humans really such warm beings?

“Well, what do you think, Uwa?”

“... Huh? Ah... Well, let’s pick a day after the athletics festival ends.”

Chihiro could not bring himself to coldly reject Tada’s invitation, so he accepted it.

“Great, then that’s decided. But... the athletics festival, huh?”

Tada smirked bitterly, and Shimono spoke in a low voice:

“Hooow do I put this? Since a lot of classes are unusually serious about it, I think we’re gonna lose badly.”

“In other words... With things the way they are now, we can’t save our asses anymore.”

Both chuckled as though they had more to say.

During class, Chihiro thought, ignoring the teacher’s endless torrent of a lecture.

He was once under the despairing impression that it was over; he believed that he would be facing the worst world imaginable today.

But the world was unusually gentle.

Chihiro discovered that, even though he wanted to reject everything, there would still be someone who was concerned for him and would help him.

Whether it was Enjouji, Inaba, Nagase, Aoki, his mother, Shimon, or Tada.

For everything wrong that Chihiro had done, the world did not blame him. Instead, it tried to protect him, vile as he was.

It was different from the one he knew before. The world shouldn't be like this. The world should be crueler, with only innately lucky people being rewarded.

Was he wrong?

The question kept popping up in a corner of his mind.

Chihiro hadn't been this enthusiastic for some time. He even went as far as to think that he'd find the answer if he searched for it.

Chihiro tried to search.

He swiveled his head back and forth, surveying the classroom.

It was Classical Japanese class. Some were diligently taking notes, some were spacing out, and some were slumped on their desks, asleep... No, of course Chihiro didn't think the answer was in the classroom.

Chihiro met eyes with a boy. He also seemed unfit to listen to the lecture, bored out of his mind.

The boy grinned at him, and he couldn't help but grin back.

For some reason, Chihiro lowered his head, trying not to laugh. The awareness of being deliberate partners in crime created a momentarily bizarre, comical feeling.

It shocked him that he was able to smile. It was clearly meaningless, there was clearly nothing, he clearly felt such a strong sense of despair, yet he had still smiled.

Then, Chihiro thought of something.

Maybe... his perspective of the world was wrong after all.

Even though Chihiro had always believed that the world had abandoned him.

But actually...

It wasn't like that. This world was actually loving him, wasn't it?

As long as he changed his perspective, changed his thoughts.

He hadn't been punished, so he couldn't be reborn. But since he hadn't been punished, this also meant that no one hated him.

The situation with Yui and Taichi was a sin, but Inaba and the others believed that they would be all right. In other words, this whole thing would be all right.

Maybe he was overthinking it?

In reality, the simpler this world was, the easier people could live. Compared to himself, when those people, who seemingly thought of nothing, led their lives so well, was it simply because they had already accepted this truth?

Was this what he needed — the correct answer?

When he thought of this, he knew that this *was* the correct answer because Inaba, Enjouji, and the others were living so happily. Since he had finally discovered this precious truth, maybe he could succeed along with them as well.

Chihiro felt his mood lift, as though his very soul were excited... No, no, he was very calm.

Before now, his luck was running low, but that sort of misfortune had now ceased. Enjouji had helped him find an escape, and, objectively, his luck had been improving ever since.

If it were now, he could do it. He could only take action in this mood.

With this momentum, Chihiro concealed his embarrassed attitude and stood before Enjouji at the front of the classroom.

Enjouji looked up at Chihiro from her seat.

He had to do it now. If he didn't, he'd never have another chance to do it — Chihiro urged himself on, convincing himself.

“Um...”

Chihiro forced himself to pluck up his courage, but it was still embarrassing.

Enjouji was clearly looking up at him, but it felt like she was looking down upon him.

“I’m really sorry... about Saturday.”

Chihiro was unable to look her in the eye as he spoke.

“Because my mind and body had hit their limit that day...”

“And?”

Enjouji’s reaction was unexpected. Chihiro had been expecting her to chirp, “Let’s work hard together!”, but that didn’t happen. She looked as though she were trying to see him clearly.

“So... I want to know if there’s anything I can help with now.”

“R-Really... Hm, I see.”

Enjouji nodded, slightly nervous.

“Well, about that thing, how much progress have you guys made?”

“A-Anyway, come with me first, since it’ll be bad if we’re overheard.”

Enjouji replied, and led Chihiro into the hallway.

After confirming that no one was nearby, she began:

“Um, we’ve been monitoring places where <Heartseed> has appeared before, because he may be able to restore their memories. When <Heartseed> meets me or Chihiro-kun, he always does so in the nature park; he seems to like that place a lot now.”

This was the first matter — Enjouji said, then continued:

“A-And then, we’ve been slowly trying to talk about the past to Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai. This is very taxing for both of them so we can’t act boldly, and that’s why we decided to take it slow. Ah, also, we’re trying to befriend them without connection to the past. We’ve also considered shock therapy, which is to use *that* power to create an irresolvable paradox, but that plan’s too dangerous, so we’re saving it for later. Other than that, Inaba-senpai and the others think that if they make themselves interesting, *he* should show up, so

we're also thinking of using this method..."

A great flood of information gushed into his mind. He never would have thought that they were formulating so many plans and already taking action. Although she was stuttering a little, Enjouji still explained everything from end to end, which also greatly surprised Chihiro.

"R-Really? Then... What can I do?" Chihiro asked.

Then, Enjouji began to look observant again.

"I don't know."

He felt as if he had been lowered a rope that led somewhere other than his destination.

"Uh... Hey, you know..."

What did that mean? He had clearly expressed his willingness to help despite indeed being slower, yet didn't receive anything remotely close to gratitude. If he took action, maybe he would change. As Enjouji had said, "You have to take action, then change." The most important thing was that his luck ought to be flourishing right now.

"Ah... Uh, um... You should ask Inaba-senpai and the others."

I see, I see, so I should do that next?

"I'm really sorry... Um, I want to help do something too."

After school, Chihiro headed towards the clubroom and apologized to everyone with his head bowed.

Although his stomach had complained on the way to the clubroom, the time had been decided beforehand so he couldn't be late. Besides, Enjouji had told him to do it, so he wasn't doing anything wrong.

"I'm late because my mind and body were acting up a bit, but..."

Chihiro lifted his head and stole a glance at Inaba, Nagase, and Aoki's expressions. They didn't look welcoming at all; everyone's faces were stern. This had to be the same as when he had apologized last time, a sign that they would accept him afterwards like nothing had happened. Chihiro thought this,

but— “Hey, Chihiro... Have you prepared yourself?”

Inaba asked stiffly, staring at him.

Was she testing him? He couldn't blame her.

“Wha... Yeah.”

Although he didn't know what kind of preparation Inaba meant, he should have already been prepared anyway.

“... What do you think, Iori?”

“Hmm... I think Chihhi's strength in this is needed, but...”

But what?

They didn't look welcoming.

It was as though the atmosphere were saying, *‘We don't need you, Chihiro’*. This was too weird.

“Anyway, let's have him do something first.”

Aoki suggested, and Inaba nodded sternly.

“I say, do you not have an ounce of independence?”

“Huh? Ahh, I'm not used to bringing up my own ideas...”

“Why?”

“Uh... because...”

“Inaban.”

Nagase stopped Inaba, who looked to be in a very bad mood.

Why was she forcing answers out of him like this? Chihiro didn't know the meaning behind this attitude of hers.

The first thing that came out of his mouth was an offer to help, and he had even apologized. Although Chihiro knew that this wasn't really worthy of praise, they were able to forgive that kind of wrongdoing, so what was there to be angry about now?

Did he do it wrong?

Or was his impression of all of it wrong? Was this world actually not pure, simple, and gentle?

Someone tell him; he may look like this, but in truth, he was frantically searching for answers and trying to take action.

Someone talk to him, tell him that everything will be okay if he does that.

But reality was cruel. Inaba merely said: “You can go home today.”



Chihiro received a text from Inaba first thing in the morning telling everyone to gather at the clubroom. Although he felt a little awkward, he immediately agreed. Because she had asked him to.

“Chihiro’s mission is to try and get in contact with <Heartseed>, request that he explain everything, and if possible, try to negotiate with him... Basically, just try to bump into <Heartseed>.”

Inaba had told him this in the clubroom building before first period, and had added a few instructions. The other members were gathered there as well.

“So the most probable location is the nature park after all,” Inaba said after Chihiro gave a detailed explanation of the circumstances under which he had met <Heartseed>, but since he would only appear when he felt like it, it was unclear whether they could see him as planned.

No matter what, the fact that he had a mission made Chihiro breathe a sigh of relief. He was needed, and he could take action to help solve the problem.

Then, everyone discussed simplistically, and Chihiro listened quietly.

Since they didn’t have much time, when everyone was about to end the conversation, Enjouji spoke up:

“Ah, um... I’m thinking, because <Heartseed> will be entering Gotou-sensei’s body... W-We only need to monitor Gotou-sensei, don’t we?”

“Hmm? Ahh, that plan won’t work at all. Because when we monitor him from

the side, *he* won't possess him no matter what."

Hearing Inaba's reply, Chihiro became less and less convinced. At this rate, could they really encounter <Heartseed> as they thought?

"Ah... I see, I'm sorry I troubled you guys..."

"It's nothing, Shino-chan! Suggest away!"

"Y-Yes! I-I will try my best, Iori-senpai."

It seemed that Enjouji had completely blended into her upperclassmen's circle.

After school, Chihiro left for the nature park alone.

Chihiro walked inside by himself. He'd never thought that this would become somewhere he frequented.

Come to think of it, he hadn't met <Heartseed> again after he threatened him. It was Enjouji who had seen him recently, so he felt that she had a higher chance of encountering him.

Chihiro advanced, stepping on fallen branches.

Drop the idea that you can safely return to the original world — He had threatened him so, but no direct retribution had come.

Did this mean that he was still considering it? Or was the loss of those two's memories the very thing that <Heartseed> had threatened?

His own crimes were his greatest punishment — Really?

If so, he couldn't help but feel too despaired, and could only spend the rest of his life criticized by guilt.

What should he do?

Of course, the best thing would be to recover those two's memories, so he should be working towards that.

Could memories really be recovered?... No, they had to be. If he didn't believe it, how could he continue to fight... *Drop the idea that you can safely return to*

the original world — No.

He couldn't see the ending of this story.

Chihiro only just realized that he had never thought about a way to end this since its beginning. He clearly wanted to step into an unusual world, yet he hadn't been prepared at all.

He'd thought he was someone powerful.

He'd obviously only received that power by chance.

Chihiro became immeasurably self-satisfied upon receiving the power, and told himself that he wanted to climb upwards.

But where exactly was [upwards]?

Nothing belonged to Chihiro; not a single one of his thoughts was formulated from scratch.

Chihiro suddenly realized: *Where is this?*

While walking aimlessly, he had arrived somewhere he had never been.

Chihiro was thinking of nothing. It was the same now, too; he was standing here because he had been ordered to do so. Chihiro was merely following orders, and was happy to.

Huh? Wait.

—After seeing <Heartseed>, what was he supposed to do then?

“Is it going to end like this? ...Hmm, Uwa-san?”

Such a voice came from within the woods.

A voice like a moan from the depths of Hell.

[Something] entered Chihiro's view.

It was the [something] who was not angry at all, in the form of Gotou.

This was after school, right? The teachers should be at school, was it okay for

them to come outside like this? How did he get outside? How did he know what they were planning? He was even controlling this — Chihiro's mind was filled with questions that didn't need to slip out.

<Heartseed> was here.

<Heartseed> was — was here.

Chihiro had tried to contact him, and succeeded. Now what should he do? Ask him for an explanation, negotiate with him, but this was horrible timing. Inaba had given him detailed instructions... but had she explained *how* to ask <Heartseed> for an explanation, and how to negotiate with him?

“You haven't been... using your power recently... has it already ended?”

<Heartseed> asked.

Chihiro's body went rigid.

He heard the sound of large breaths being taken. Were they his own? It felt difficult to breathe, like he was lacking oxygen.

What was <Heartseed> doing?

Did only he feel this way?

Was he alone in having this feeling?

“Oh, dear... You can't just stay silent... Is it really going to end like this? Then, I'll... end you?”

So there *is* another punishment?

A punishment crueler than that.

A punishment that would be applied directly onto him.

What was it...?

Memories?

Would he forget everything?

“Did you think everything would end just like that?”

He shouldn't have said that aloud.

Perhaps he could see through his heart?

“P... Please stop... Spare me... I don’t want...”

Chihiro emitted a trembling voice; tears may have even fallen from his eyes, and he dropped to his knees right then and there.

“Oh dear... Well... Hmm...”

His flat voice terrified Chihiro even further.

Chihiro had thought that he wanted to be punished, once lamenting his lack of punishment, and yet he had ended up like this. He talked about becoming like this or that because he didn’t get punished, and it all turned out to be an excuse to escape, to justify his own actions.

<Heartseed>’s eyes flashed. This is the end, Chihiro thought. *This is the end. I’m scared.*

Who will come save me... It’s a little too late for this, but who will come save me...

Please.

Just this once.

Save... me.

“Ah... Heart... <Heartseed>!”

A third voice.

The voice of redemption?

Chihiro turned to look behind him.

Appearing before him was his savior — Enjouji Shino.

“You’re kidding me... It actually happened... Ah, wait!”

Enjouji sprinted forward and Chihiro turned his eyes back, only to see <Heartseed> disappear into the woods.

“W-Wait! Ow!”

Enjouji went sprawling onto the ground and crawled back up, moaning.

“Chi-Chihiro-kun, what’re you doing? We have to catch up to him! We need to capture that guy!”

“... Huh?”

Chihiro stood up, but he could no longer see <Heartseed>’s silhouette and couldn’t hear footsteps.

“... H-He got away?”

Originally wanting to chase after him but stopping her footsteps, Enjouji murmured, “Gotta tell them first anyway,” and pulled out her phone. She seemed to be reporting what had just happened to Inaba.

“... Okay, then I’ll stay here, please watch the school gate, senpais.”

It appeared to be an official <Heartseed> capture operation, but all <Heartseed> needed to do was pull himself away from Gotou’s consciousness, so it seemed pointless... wasn’t it?

Enjouji finished her call and put her phone away.

“... Chihiro-kun.”

Enjouji looked back at him, her expression very severe. Chihiro had never seen such a face on her. The emotion this expression conveyed was... [rage]?

“Chihiro-kun, why... *why* did you just let him go like that?! Why didn’t you chase after him? That was... An opportunity like that only comes *once in a blue moon*! Tell me, *why*?!”

She calls that an opportunity? No, no matter how he looked at it, it had to be danger, right? A dangerous situation from which he had narrowly escaped.

“Chihiro-kun, shouldn’t you be aware that we need to capture <Heartseed>?!”

Enjouji shouted, seizing Chihiro’s uniform. Driven by her emotions, she shook him with both hands. Chihiro let her shake him, bathing in the emotions exploding from her. Enjouji, always stuttering, now was unrecognizable as her

usually tepid self, releasing her state of mind onto Chihiro.

“So that’s why... Ahh, yeah, the senpais knew all along!”

“... What do you mean?”

Chihiro asked in a low voice. The fact that he didn’t know what to do after <Heartseed> had appeared and could only cower like that, unable to do so much as verbally tear into him, was much too embarrassing.

Enjouji let go of Chihiro’s uniform and took a step back.

“... When this began, we originally wanted to ask you to help out more. But you didn’t come to the clubroom on Saturday, and the senpais said that you didn’t seem prepared enough when you showed up on Monday.”

So he’d been tested, and was exposed?

“So, they asked you to find <Heartseed>, but didn’t restrict you too much and gave you free rein. They also said that your chance of encountering <Heartseed> was the highest, and asked me to monitor your movements.”

“... Are you saying that you followed me?”

“I-I couldn’t follow you all the way... But pretty much, yes.”

So Enjouji would only show herself under those circumstances? Indeed, it would be too much of a coincidence.

Was he the bait?

Did he only amount to that kind of value?

Yeah, he only amounted to that kind of value.

“By the way... If I’d known that we need to capture him, I wouldn’t have slipped up like that. Besides, she only told me to contact him...”

“Do you plan to push the responsibility to someone else like you did back then?”

These words struck him like a bullseye, piercing deep where it hurt in his heart.

“You always push your wrongdoings onto the people around you, and the

senpais have already seen through this.”

Pushing his wrongdoings onto the people around him — They’d seen through it.

“You keep dodging and never try to fight. You keep dodging because you’re afraid to get hurt, right?”

Chihiro couldn’t think of anything to refute her with.

“When I found you after you’d run away from home, I thought you had changed, but you’re still your old self.

Once was enough, but he was a repeat offender.

He had tried to change, but couldn’t immediately change at all.

“I thought you had finally taken action, but you still ended up pushing everything to someone else.”

She couldn’t have made it more difficult to listen to.

“Then tell me, what am I supposed to — *do?!?*”

That was it.

That was why she said that he would push everything onto others.

“Although I’m not that remarkable... But I think I have the right to say this to you, Chihiro-kun. So I’ll say it directly—”

—You keep dodging and escaping. How long do you plan to keep escaping?

How long does he plan to keep escaping?

Where does he plan to escape to?

Chihiro had never once considered that.

Chihiro thought that he had been looking forward, but he was really a shallow person, always prioritizing his own [happiness] and [desires].

Pushing his wrongdoing onto others, always escaping, never trying to help,

giving everything to someone else.

His true self — placed right in front of him.

Chihiro was surprised at none of it because, deep down, he had truly known.

After all, it was himself; he would naturally be familiar.

But up until recently, he'd never known — no, he'd pretended not to know.

Including that, had he always been evading?

He had always been evading, and the more he evaded, the deeper he sank, unable to pull himself out.

“Hey, can we really go on like this? If Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai never... if Yui-senpai never remembers you, would it mean nothing? If all of their memories up until now completely vanish, would it still mean nothing to you?”

Enjouji had stopped caring about her own appearance and was yelling desperately. Caught in the midst of such intense emotions, Chihiro's mind unexpectedly calmed a bit. He'd been intimidated by her imposition and could only stand there, petrified.

Come to think of it, they shouldn't be the type of people to expose their emotions like this, should they?

Had Enjouji Shino really changed?

Had she already gone to *that* world?

“Chihiro-kun, you... you like Yui-senpai, don't you?!”

He had always longed.

He, a shadow of a person, had always longed to approach that sun.

But somehow, he had already forgotten his true emotions.

From then on he had merely looked up at it.

He didn't think he was capable of approaching it, but he still revered that sun unconsciously.

It obviously wasn't an unconscious feeling, but Chihiro had intentionally ignored it because he was always evading, afraid of getting hurt.

Chihiro remembered.

He remembered the day he had made Yui and Taichi lose their memories.

He had used [Fantasy Projection] to escape.

Was that the greatest act of escapism in his life? But he still hadn't learned his lesson, and was still escaping?

"Can it really end like this!?"

And Enjouji forced him into an impasse.

He was left helpless; this was his end.

This was the worst possible scenario. There was nothing worse than this.

Tears seemed ready to fall from his eyes.

Was it because he was being moved emotionally due to expressing his feelings? Enjouji's eyes were also brimming with tears and her face was twisted. As though she couldn't hold it in anymore, Enjouji hung her head and her tears dropped to the ground. Then, she immediately looked straight up.

Watching her, Chihiro noticed something.

So it was: if one looked down when they wanted to cry, tears would fall out.

But if one looked upwards, tears wouldn't fall out.

So Chihiro raised his head to look up.

The vast sky unfolded before his eyes.

It was blue enough to sting a bit.

For some reason, he didn't think the sky was a board now.

The sky looked like an immeasurably deep, smooth, wide solid.

It was beautiful.

No matter how bad his situation was, the sky today was still beautiful.

The tears rolling in his eyes had still not disappeared, so Chihiro kept looking up at the sky.

The sky was so big, so wide. Childlike thoughts floated into his mind.

He wanted to spend a bit more time, to think about something. But under this patch of sky, he just couldn't bring himself to bother with trivial matters. He tried to think about something more important, more closely related to him.

Yes, he might as well think about things related to this world.

Chihiro had always thought that this world was very miserly.

No matter how diligently he studied, if he ran out of luck on test day, it would become an irredeemable failure in his life.

When that girl who always put off practice came back, in the blink of an eye she'd surpass everyone who had always practiced seriously and become the strongest in the dojo.

No matter how he yearned for it day and night, when he noticed it, that other person had already become an existence out of his reach.

Even if he wanted to change and tried hard to climb up, he was always bound to the bottom, as if that place were his rightful position.

Untameable. This world was utterly untameable.

This world was boring beyond belief, horribly dull, without future, without light.

But the blue sky was so beautiful today. —Ahh,

I've noticed it already.

This sky will not change, no matter when.

No matter when, it will still be beautiful.

No matter when, it will still be magnificent.

No matter when, this world will keep its original form.

This overly natural truth fell into Chihiro's heart.

The world will not abandon him. It will not treat him severely.

But it would not treat him kindly either, or let him live an easy, simple life.

The world will always keep its original form; no matter when, no matter to whom, it was a fair existence.

The world will always protect everyone, while maintaining the same form.

He had always held the world in contempt and thought that it was incurable; but deep down, he had longed for a certain world. Back then, Chihiro already knew that this world had two faces, but he didn't acknowledge this and merely kept brainwashing himself, thinking this this world was boring and tedious.

Why was this?

The answer was very simple: he was unable to belong to that world he longed for. Because he never did anything well and never became his ideal self, he thought that the world was something boring. So this couldn't be helped, he wasn't in the wrong — Chihiro explained, justifying himself. But if it were the ending he was hoping for, then Chihiro would definitely think that this world was wonderful.

The reason clearly lay with him, yet he pushed the guilt onto the world.

Since he was willing to push the [wrongdoing] onto the world, he was, of course, willing to push other things onto other people.

Not knowing how to think and solve it for himself, giving everything to others, always relying on his surroundings, and the only thing of his stronger than that of everyone else was self-esteem, twice as much. He immersed himself in thought only to avoid getting hurt, only for his own self-esteem. Even so, he had never done anything useful.

Chihiro had always used this lifestyle to create his own world.

It was all created by his hand.

The world had always kept its original form, but perspectives towards this world probably varied from person to person. The differences lay with how the observer saw this world.

The one changing his perspective on the world and architecting his own world

was himself.

He had thought this world absolutely no good, because he was absolutely no good.

He had thought this world utterly filthy, because his own lenses were dirty.

The one who had decided this world's worth, this world's color, was none other than himself.

Now, for example, although he had hit rock bottom and wanted to die, although he saw himself as such, to Enjouji, it was different.

Although he had hit rock bottom, meaning that his spring had been compressed to the very lowest point, it was building strength.

This was a danger with narrow escapes, so it was the first and the last chance.

His perspective on the world was his to decide.

Was this correct?

After being lost for so long, had he finally found the correct answer?

Chihiro didn't know. But no one would tell him the correct answer even if he said, "I don't know," then abandoned this matter.

He had to confirm it himself.

No matter when, the correct answer will be there.

Whether he thought it was correct, no matter when, the power to decide rested with him.

To acknowledge this naturally existing world, everything was up to him.

With the answer in his heart, Chihiro turned his face forward again.

"Chi-Chihiro... kun?"

Enjouji looked slightly confused. After all, Chihiro kept looking up at the sky, right up until his neck began to hurt; it's no wonder she was concerned.

"Hey, Enjouji."

Chihiro called Enjouji, and then, for safety, brushed the corner of his eye... it was dry.

If he didn't look down, but up instead, the tears wouldn't drop out.

"You've changed."

"Huh... Huuhhh? I-I've changed? Is my change so obvious that even you can notice it, Chihiro-kun?"

"You've changed, all right."

Hearing Chihiro say this, Enjouji cried ecstatically, "Wow! Yay! Yay!", but she was clearly not used to expressing joy.

"I-It's embarrassing to have someone say it to you directly like that! Heheheh... I should say, Chihiro-kun, you seem to suddenly have a different vibe, have you changed?"

"Can you see it?"

Would my inner change be displayed on the surface so suddenly?

"Yep, I can tell by your voice."

What kind of special power is that?

But even if only Enjouji could notice, it would be displayed by his attitude, expressing that a great change had taken place in his heart.

"Maybe it's like I've found the correct answer... That's what I think. If that's the truth, it's all thanks to you, so thank you."

How long had it been since he frankly expressed his gratitude to someone like this?

"T-That's embarrassing! Or rather, just from that one moment, something can happen... Ahh, it's possible."

Enjouji seemed to have had the same experience, it was like she could understand.

"This situation does exist, the moment when you find the [truth] you've always been searching for."

"Have you found it too, Enjouji?"

"Hmm... P-Pretty much."

“By now, shouldn’t you be more sure of yourself?”

So bold and powerful when she’s imposing.

“Right, there’s something else. Enjouji, when you said [truth] just now... It’s just as you said, I don’t know whether my own thoughts are the [truth]. How do you think I should judge that?”

If it’s her, she should know, right? Chihiro thought and asked.

Enjouji was a powerful person. If he thought of that, he could gradually see her merits. If he could earn something from within, he’d like to as well. As a result, he seemed to be able to grow more than before.

“Yeah, if you don’t do anything and let that thought stay in its original form, maybe it’ll become an imposter.”

Saying this, Enjouji looked a little pleased with herself.

Then, she seemed to want to say, “Let me tell you a very shocking secret,” and smiled:

“You have to take action and turn it into the [truth] on your own.”

I see.

—— By the way, I think you mentioned something about me liking Yui-san...”

—— Huh?! Am I wrong!? When I was using my [power], the condition I set was ‘the person whom Chihiro-kun wants to see and talk to the most right now’, and I became Yui-senpai, so I thought that was it...

—— Don’t say it again!

—— O-Okay! Hm, but you didn’t deny it... in other words, you *do* like Yui-senpai...

—— Don’t immediately repeat it, okay!? Also... sorry for all the trouble.

—— What trouble?

—— The trouble of making you run around, making you scream, making you watch me say nothing, and making you mad! Don’t make me say it, it’s

humiliating!

—— It's your fault, so why are you scolding me?

—— I-I'm sorry...



“About our plan to forcibly cause an irresolvable paradox, if we want to do this, I should be the one to do it. I should be able to use my [power]. Also, I will find <Heartseed> again, because the chance of him coming to me should be pretty high.”

The five members of the Cultural Research Club who were able to gather met in their clubroom; Chihiro apologized to everyone and listened respectfully to their explanations of phenomena that had happened in connection to <Heartseed>, then suggested a plan he came up with.

“Oh, okay... It's just that the risks with a forcible activation are very high, and I think it's still too early to move.”

Inaba replied, a little surprised.

Chihiro thought a mere apology wouldn't be enough to convey his own determination, so he had tried to express his intentions with a completed plan, but was it still not good enough?

“Chihhi.”

Nagase called Chihiro's name, her arms crossed over her chest.

“Yeah, I'm here.”

After Chihiro responded, Nagase slowly opened her eyes and the corners of her mouth lifted.

“You've been reborn.”

Nagase pointed at Chihiro and declared in a mocking tone.

“Thank you for the praise, senpai.”

Chihiro bowed and thanked her politely, but ended up being suspected:
“Wait, does Chihhi have that kind of personality? Maybe he’s an imposter?”

“Did something happen? Chihiro?” Aoki asked.

“Long story...”

Chihiro was just about to speak, but he hesitated. His own intentions were a little too idealistic and felt very artificial; he didn’t dare discuss these in front of [genuine] people like Nagase, Inaba, or Aoki.

“Chi-Chihiro-kun! Um...”

Enjouji looked as though she were about to say something; was she going to encourage him?

Wait a second, if she were to do that, then Enjouji would steal all his thunder.

“For the longest time, I kept pushing my wrongdoings to my surroundings... but I’ve finally noticed that. Everything is dependent on myself, or should I say that the world will always keep its original form... Wait, scratch that last bit!”

What the hell was he saying? Chihiro couldn’t help but feel embarrassed. Even if it were supposed to be funny, this was overly humiliating.

“Ahhahahaha!”

“Hahahahaha!”

“Pff, wahahahaha!”

Chihiro’s words sent Nagase, Inaba, and Aoki into fits of laughter.

They were laughing at him, but Chihiro didn’t hate it. Because he already knew that this was joyous laughter that wouldn’t annoy him.

If he just observed closely, he would discover these things.

“Not bad, Chihhi! You’ve grown! Ahh, Chihhi’s a hardworking kid after all. It’s just that you like to get into fights and can’t use your powers properly!”

“Did I really seem like I like getting into fights back then? No, but I... I don’t count as hardworking, I’m just normal.”

“Then normal people are hardworking kids as well!”

Did she really just explain it like that? What an interesting person.

“Well Chihhi, as your senpai, I’ll give you a bit of advice.”

Nagase said, then continued in a very masculine, macho voice.

“You lack courage and self-esteem. You care too much about what others think of you, but you don’t need to worry about that. You just do you. Your own lifestyle is determined by how you value yourself.”

“It sounds really convincing when you say it, heheheh.”

Inaba chuckled, and stuck her tongue out at Nagase.

“Then I’ll say something too.”

It was Inaba’s turn to speak.

“Your perspective of the world is determined by you? That’s too naive. If you’re satisfied just by changing your perspective, that’s some second-rate stuff.”

Inaba propped her legs on top of each other haughtily.

“This world doesn’t belong to anyone else - it’s yours. If you have a problem with that, go change it yourself.”

When she put it this way, it sounded like literal blasphemy.

“You’re so cool, Inaban!”

Nagase danced around cheerfully. Even Enjouji was watching Inaba in awe.

It would be better to ask, ‘Why are they acting like this? Is everyone too into it? Too into youthfulness and putting on too much of a performance? You’ll be so ashamed of yourself later that you won’t want to show your face, I can’t even keep watching you like this!’

But wasn’t this the correct way? Was *this* the spirit of youth?

In any case, Chihiro tried waiting for Aoki to speak as well.

“Huh? What’re you all staring at me for? ... Ah, judging by the circumstances, are you waiting for my suggestion? Well, th-that’s rare! Me, usually ignored at times like these... Ah, sorry! I’ll say it immediately, don’t give me that “Forget it”

look! I'm thinking about it right now! Uh... Umm..."

Aoki racked his brain for a while, yet his words were very straightforward.

"Don't think about it, just feel it!"

Well, that certainly sounded like Aoki.

In any case, with the goal of meeting <Heartseed>, Chihiro headed for the park. It seemed like that guy would only appear there.

If it were really going to end, he ought to say it clearly, and there shouldn't be repercussions afterward. *Because that's how it always is.* — Nagase and the other's words tied with them his last sliver of hope.

No matter what, when he saw that guy this time, he had to capture him.

How was he supposed to fight an opponent like him? How could he possibly win against an existence capable of instigating supernatural phenomena? Even as Chihiro kept thinking about that, as long as he stood up seriously against him, it wasn't impossible at all.

As long as he clearly recognized that guy and kept his battle plan in mind while working on attaining this absolute goal, he would indeed find a breaking point.

Being able to find a breaking point meant that he could fight.

He couldn't fight before because he didn't face the truth and kept escaping.

That guy's nature could be speculated based on past incidents, and that guy's so-called [interestingness]. From that he'd extrapolate a thought that seemed like an answer, and turn that still-fictitious "imposter" into a "reality" through actual action.

Very easy to understand. Chihiro rubbed his palms together, wanting to try it as soon as possible.

However, as it happened, even after he completed his perfect battle preparations, <Heartseed> did not appear.

Chihiro hovered around the park, walking in circles, and circles, and circles,

and circles.

Incidentally, Enjouji was beside Chihiro, desperately shuffling her feet in the same way.

Everyone had speculated that <Heartseed> didn't seem like he planned to appear before the second years, so only the two first years were there. Inaba and the others went along another route, searching for a way to solve the problem.

Right up until a moment before, the two of them had still been chatting as they walked, but they now moved in silence.

The sun began to sink, and a comfortable breeze blew. Was it because this breeze had begun when his mind was so exhausted the reason it was becoming hazy? A hole suddenly seemed to open in his heart.

"I keep feeling that... a lot of things are thanks to you, Enjouji. Thanks again."

But as soon as the words left his mouth, Chihiro could not help feeling embarrassed. And he seemed to have already thanked her before too, so in other words, he'd said it for nothing.

"I-I say that, but the problem still isn't resolved. Unless we let Yui... we let Taichi-san and Yui-san go back to the way they were, I don't have the right to say anything."

Yes, the matter still wasn't done, but they were just standing at the starting line a moment ago.

Enjouji heard this, then smiled very kindly and gently.

"That's because Taichi-senpai gave me courage. Ah, but I had the courage to go see Taichi-senpai because I saw how Iori-senpai and the others were working hard before that... No, that's not it, if I think about it, it should be because I joined this club, a-and the senpais were always like [that], and because you were there... I-If that's so, I should say that it's because I was born..."

"How far back are you gonna go?"

If she were left like that, she might go back to the creation of the universe. How massive.

But, did the world really work like that?

Hmm, this was too sentimental.

“But, you’re not wrong, the problem... still isn’t solved, so our battle is only just beginning.”

“You actually remembered the topic that I thought you’d forgotten, Enjouji.”

Even though she’s changed, she still hasn’t.

Her stuttering still persisted, and judging by her words, while she was screaming at Chihiro, it seemed that she was in Awakened Super Mode (Couldn’t he do something about the way he named things?).

In the end, they didn’t find <Heartseed> as they had wished.

On the second day, Chihiro and Enjouji rushed all over the place, but didn’t find <Heartseed>.

On the third day, Chihiro and Enjouji still rushed all over the place, but didn’t find <Heartseed>.

So on the fourth day, Chihiro and Enjouji were still desperately rushing all over the place.

“It’s... no good... He’s... not showing up... at all.”

Enjouji panted with her hands resting on her knees.

“... What the hell... So it depends on his mood after all?”

Chihiro cursed.

If they couldn’t break this stalemate, they would need a new plan. It was just as well that everyone was discussing whether to use shock therapy on Yui and Taichi.

How much time had passed since Yui and Taichi lost their memories? The most frightening thing now was if those memories had not, in fact, been carefully stored away somewhere.

<Heartseed> possessed ludicrous power. He could do things completely out of

this world.

But he was not omnipotent.

If something were under that guy's control, it could be speculated that all was according to his plan, but <Heartseed> had given the controller to someone else this time.

Could that guy be expecting an unexpected situation and backing everything up first? Inaba once said that this made her uneasy.

Chihiro really wished she would not say terrifying things like that, but her willingness to express her concerns to Chihiro and Enjouji showed that she trusted them. If that was the case, then they could at least think ahead.

He should think ahead like that, and strengthen himself more. Chihiro was recently forced to realize how important this was.

Because of something that had happened when Chihiro went to dispose of the tape recorder he had placed in the clubroom.

As if suddenly possessed, he had replayed the full recorder. Then—

“Taichi... Uuhh... Taichi...”

The recorder played Inaba's voice calling his name, and sobbing.

Inaba had always seemed easygoing to Chihiro. Even in this type of situation, her strong personality and past experience had led him to believe that she was really okay. Chihiro had always believed that Inaba was practically superhuman.

But he was wrong. They were just like him, suffering from pain.

They looked strong because they didn't expose their weak side, but they were really hiding their tears.

Since they never showed their weak side, it made Chihiro and Enjouji feel their strength. Who knows how much courage their strong side had brought to these two?

Since they showed their strong side, they made others around them strong as well.

Although they appeared successful in everything they did, that wasn't actually

the case. They were merely pretending to be successful, and they didn't stop there; through effort, they'd make that which was still an imposter into a reality.

In the end, they were standing on the same horizon as Chihiro.

Therefore, he could do it. — Chihiro thought fervently.

"The place he likes the most seems to be somewhere with no people. Let's go back and check again."

Chihiro suggested, and Enjouji agreed.

After hearing about how their upperclassmen had once been through hell and high water, when Chihiro had decided to fight along with them, frankly, he'd hoped for a moment that maybe everything could be resolved quite easily. Because once he got fired up, he felt like the world would go his way.

But, of course, nothing convenient like that would happen. The world merely maintained its original form; it wouldn't conform to him so easily.

Despite that, Chihiro would not give up.

When things got tough, *they* wouldn't just stop. *They'd* continue advancing through this cruel world.

They would take many strides, and take them step by step.

—What if <Heartseed> never appeared again?

His heart beat with anxiety as he walked.

—Even if he appeared, what if he were helpless too?

His heart pounded with questions as he walked.

—Could that kind of opportunity really descend on someone like him, who had a criminal past?

His heart beat with nervousness as he continued walking.

—If <Heartseed>, according to what he threatened beforehand, carried out the punishment on him, who had broken the contract...

Something like that wasn't crucial at all... did that sound too much like he was

showing off? It was only false bravado.

Yes, someone not genuine, like him, was still paying the most attention to himself.

But in this moment Chihiro was not advocating that, as he continued to advance.

Even if he were an imposter, he wanted to pretend to be genuine.

There was only one goal he needed to achieve now.

Then there would eventually be a day when he became genuine.

No matter how many times, he would carry on.

No matter how many times, he would continue to carry on.

He, no matter how many times, would continue to carry on.

No matter how many times, he would take action to change the world, and that's why—

<Heartseed> would appear then.

Chihiro had clearly been anticipating his appearance, yet his body froze up in an instant.

His appearance was Gotou, but he could feel his inhuman breath radiating, wanting to engulf everything around him.

This was <Heartseed>.

Chihiro's knees turned to water, and he almost couldn't keep upright.

"He's... He's here!"

Enjouji seized the hem of Chihiro's uniform.

He should go first. According to their agreed plan, he must be the one to strike first.

"Th... Think of something, bastard!"

“Huh?! M-Me...?”

“No, not you, Enjouji, I meant <Heartseed>...”

He didn't feel tense at all, and things weren't going as planned. Originally he planned to act in a more handsome fashion, but he could never do it as he had planned it out in his mind.

Calm down, everything's fine. He had set up a battle plan. All he needed to do was to put the thoughts in his mind into practice.

<Heartseed> said nothing, merely standing there, even making one wonder if he were alive.

Just as Chihiro was thinking about this, he suddenly spoke:

“Ahh... I've recently been under the impression that... you guys have been looking all over for me... Ahh, normally I wouldn't come out by myself... but things haven't been moving forward...”

“Haven't been moving forward... so you've pulled back?” Chihiro asked.

“... No, since being laissez-faire is interesting in its own right, after all...”

Up until now, he would only pull back once he was bored, and had always done so.

“U-Um... <Heartseed>... san, a-are you able to restore Taichi-senpai and Yui-senpai's memories?”

Enjouji's tone was unusually polite.

“If restoring them would also be [very interesting]... I don't think that would be a problem...”

In other words, if he wanted to, he *could* restore their memories?

“Ahh... but first, thank you for addressing me as 'san'. I think it's the first time I've been called as such...”

“D-Don't mention it.”

<Heartseed> was placing emphasis on a very strange place. This conversation really felt lacking in tension.

“Hey, <Heartseed>, you can restore their memories, right? Please help us restore them, then. If you have any c-conditions, I’m willing to a-accept them.”

His words caught in his throat; <Heartseed> had narrowed his eyes and was staring fiercely at Chihiro.

The change in his weak expression completely altered the atmosphere.

“What a pity, for Uwa-san to say such a thing...”

He was blaming him.

“... You’re giving up while halfway through [making things more interesting] ... and besides, Uwa-san... this is all your fault, is it not?”

Chihiro couldn’t deny that.

Normally, his stupidity would prevent him from negotiating with someone.

No matter how he thought about it, he was at an impasse.

He wanted so much to run away.

But those were his own thoughts. As long as he tried to find a different path, he would definitely find one.

Besides, since this guy was a heretical existence who lacked common sense and perspective, he should have weak points.

“As long as I... make things more interesting, right?!”

Strike at this point.

<Heartseed>’s eyes retracted their sharp gaze, restoring their blank, forward stare.

“I’ll make things interesting... I’ll make them very interesting, all right. So... So quickly restore Yui-san and Taichi-san’s lost memories. Let’s make a deal, you bastard!”

If he didn’t deride him a bit to lift his own spirits, he wouldn’t be able handle it anymore.

“Um... a deal, you say? You shouldn’t be a position to say that, Uwa-san...”

“For example, I’ll tell everyone that I used my [power]!”

Chihiro screamed at the top of his lungs.

“I’ll tell everyone about my super dark and childish thoughts! Or I’ll show everyone my diary that I wrote while I was in public high school, which I’ve locked away now!”

What the hell was he saying? — Chihiro ignored the questions flashing through his mind, moving with his own energy. If he stopped, it would probably be all over.

“Or I’ll pull out all the stops and tell everyone in the Cultural Research Club, frankly, what I think of each one of them! And... Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it! That can make things more interesting, right?! Oh yeah, I don’t need the [Fantasy Projection] power anymore! Take it back!”

“Fantasy Projection?”

“... Fantasy Projection?”

“I-It’s a name I gave my [power]! Nothing wrong with that, is there?!”

How embarrassing, he didn’t think it would be this awkward to reveal his own original name.

“I-I’m willing to do anything! I’ll do my best! Sorry to trouble you!”

Enjouji shouted along. Rather than making a deal, it sounded more like she was pleading with him, which seemed to deviate slightly from Chihiro’s goal.

“Whoo... Really... You people will do interesting things, huh... The price is restoring Yaegashi-san and Kiriya-san’s memories, and to never let you use your [power] again... Is that so...”

He got through to him.

This method could actually work. A thin ray of hope wavered.

“But... if you want to make a deal, I feel like you people’s [interestingness] isn’t enough, so it’s best if... For example... what you’ve always wanted to try, deep down, Uwa-san... or something like that.”

<Heartseed> said.

Chihiro felt like his inner thoughts were being spied on. That guy had probably

already seen through him.

His deepest, darkest thoughts were being stared at; he didn't want to be seen, he wanted to hide, this was embarrassing — but this wasn't the moment to fuss. There couldn't be anything worse than this, could there?

“Then I'll confess to Yui-san! I'll even do it in front of everyone in the Cultural Research Club!”

That kind of declaration wasn't worth much.

“Oh... compared to what you just brought up... that seems a little interesting...”

He seemed quite satisfied, would it work?

“But... what if I still refuse?”

“But”?

He couldn't say that he had exhausted absolutely everything in his preparations, but he was truly out of ideas, unable to think of anything crazier.

“Then wipe my memories!”

A shout like that was suddenly heard.

He didn't shout that.

If it wasn't him, then it could only have been Enjouji Shino.

“Y-You can wipe my memories about the Cultural Research Club... in exchange for restoring their memories... How's that? Y-You can do it, right? It's equivalent exchange, too!”

This action was way too absurd, way too ridiculous.

But Enjouji — Enjouji, who had somehow already let go of Chihiro's shirt hem, was prepared.

Prepared, with intense resolve.

Was he a step behind Enjouji again?

Was he not trying, or was Enjouji too strong?

What should he think now? The one who could choose his own perspective

on things was himself. So... he'd take it as Enjouji being very strong.

But he vowed that one day he'd catch up to her, and pass her.

Although the determination he had now, based on his momentum, was merely an imposter, Chihiro would make it a reality in the future of this world.

"Then wipe my memories too! Two for two! You satisfied now?!"

Even if he were to lose that dreamlike time and space, he must get something in return for it.

The five-person pentagon must be Inaba, Nagase, Yui, Taichi, and Aoki.

As an admirer of that pentagon, this was something he ought to do.

Steeling his willpower, he prepared himself.

This was the end and the beginning.

"How about it, <Heartseed>?!"

Such a moment would render the world—

"... What if I still refuse?"

—still the same.

"Wh... Why..."

Enjouji mumbled, half sobbing.

Chihiro had understood long ago.

Even if he did his utmost, faced the end of his tether, Lady Luck would not smile upon him.

In his life, he had already been forced to experience this principle several times.

This wasn't anyone's fault, and he shouldn't hate anyone for it.

Whether it happened or not, he could only resign to fate.

But now... now was different.

Just in this current situation — he must rely upon himself to seize victory.

"... What will you do?"

<Heartseed> asked again.

This was his last chance.

So think hard, think hard, think hard.

He wasn't at his limit yet. Unless he thought so; then he would be at his limit.

Go change.

Have a plan.

"... *Whoo*... If you don't have anything—"

Ahh, he was out of time.

"T-Then, I'll... cry in front of you!"

Tweet tweet tweet. — he could hear birdsong.

A blank space suddenly appeared in time; it was quiet enough to hear birdsong.

In this type of situation, this type of development, this type of occasion, the fact that all he could utter was, 'Then I'll cry in front of you,' filled Chihiro with despair.

"... Puha! Uu, uu... ha, hahahahah!"

Apparently desperately trying to hold it in, Enjouji burst out laughing.

"I'm s-sorry, Chihiro-ku... Pu, huhuhuhuuu..."

"Y-You're laughing too much, Enjouji!"

In the instant that Chihiro was distracted by criticizing her—

"... Pff... What d'you mea — Huh?"

He heard <Heartseed>'s voice.

Moreover, Chihiro instinctively noticed that there was something different than before.

Chihiro turned around, only to see a stunned expression on <Heartseed>'s

face.

His expression was definitively different from what he had seen before.

Chihiro examined it more closely, then discovered something.

That was <Heartseed>'s natural reaction.

That was a naturally expressed voice and appearance — Chihiro felt it.

“... Did I just... laugh?”

His voice was different from before; it was an unadulterated, candid voice.

What was going on?

What had changed in <Heartseed>'s mind?

“It was already too much for me... so I tried to give it to someone else to do... what an unexpected gain... How... How interesting... How very interesting...”

Although Chihiro couldn't understand what this meant, <Heartseed> was very visibly excited.

Furthermore, he was genuinely interested.

This is it.

After Chihiro desperately thought and racked his brain, that sentence finally hooked him.

This was his very last chance to seize victory and win back the future.

“Hey, hey! You think that's interesting, right? You just said that! Don't horse around now! The price is that [interestingness] just now! If you take this chance to restore their memories... I'll show you something even more [interesting]! So give their memories—”

“Sure.”

The ending moment came so easily that it was simple enough to be anticlimactic.

<Heartseed> had already lost interest in Chihiro and the others, becoming spiritedly engrossed in himself.



Kiriyama Yui and Yaegashi Taichi recovered their memories.

Without any repercussions, they returned to the Cultural Research Club.

In the Cultural Research Club where all seven members gathered, Chihiro explained this incident to everyone.

From before they had met <Heartseed>, right up until <Heartseed> had said, “I’ve already restored them back to their original form and stopped you from using your ‘powers’, so I’m going now...” As meticulously as possible, Chihiro recounted this unbelievably long story to everyone.

No matter what happened, Chihiro wanted them to know the entire sequence of events and make their own judgment afterwards.

Starting from the middle, Enjouji also helped tell the story, but one day wasn’t enough to finish. They left the rest for the next day.

When he had talked until his mouth and throat were dry and his voice had begun to crack, he finally finished the entire story.

After finishing his explanation, and even though he had apologized profusely throughout, Chihiro apologized to everyone once again.

Chihiro didn’t wish for their forgiveness or for them to let him off; he merely wanted to express his regret to everyone.

He thought that it would inevitable for him to be kicked out of the club, and it wouldn’t even be strange if there were harsher consequences.

But should he be surprised after all? Even Yui and Taichi, who had temporarily lost their memories, did not blame Chihiro. Instead, the five upperclassmen apologized to the two, and it turned into a small apology contest between the second and first years.

“We knew that we might include you in <Heartseed>’s phenomena when you joined the Cultural Research Club, but we kept it from you, and that’s why this happened.”

Taichi and the others were apologizing, but Chihiro had actually had the chance to reject <Heartseed>’s offer. He hadn’t been caught without an explanation, so he couldn’t be the least bit angry at this.

“Okay, let’s call it quits! Both sides have now expressed their indifference!”

Pat pat. — Nagase clapped her hands together, ending the apology contest.

“Well then! Chihhi and Shino-chan, do you want to stay in the Cultural Research Club? Frankly, we don’t know how many more times things like this will happen.”

Nagase asked in a carefree manner, trying her best to avoid looking uneasy or hesitant.

“But it’ll be like this every time; we’ll definitely be able to pull through it all.”

Inaba said, looking to the side.

“Things like this have hurt our exam scores, too! Yeah, I’m serious! I failed so many classes because of these phenomena!”

“Don’t believe that no matter what, you two.”

“I got it, Iori-senpai, that’s just Idioki-senpai being too much of an idiot... Ah, I mean Aoki-senpai!”

“That’s got to be the most hurtful thing you’ve ever said! Hey, Inaba-chan, you’ve passed down your trash talking to Shino-chan, haven’t you!”

“Shut up, Idioki. I’m just passing down the Cultural Research Club’s traditions to future generations.”

“I didn’t think you were doing it for real! You should say what you’re doing first!”

Putting aside Aoki’s shouting, Taichi switched to a serious tone and spoke:

“Honestly... it would also trouble the people around us, like our families.”

“You’re so thoughtful of your family, Taichi, such a gentleman. But... I’ll never

forgive you for pampering your sister like that! Absolutely not!”

“Dereban-sensei, please save your lovers’ quarrel for later.”

Nagase put a stop to Inaba’s rage.

Then, Yui also spoke:

“Uhh, um, i-it’s not like we’re never seeing each other again after this... even if you guys want to leave, it’s completely okay... It should be, yeah.”

Only one of them couldn’t hide their feelings at all; so easy to read.

Chihiro looked at Enjouji, and Enjouji looked at Chihiro.

Neither of them said anything, they just nodded tacitly at each other. Somehow, the two of them had become good partners. Whether they would become good lovers... that was inconceivable now.

The two of them shifted their eyes to the five before them; that is, Taichi, Inaba, Iori, Yui, and Aoki.

Their answers were already decided.

“I’m staying.”

“Please allow me to stay.”

<Heartseed>? Supernatural phenomena? Bring it on. He wouldn’t be pushed around by those things. He’d once been scared out of his wits, though, so it seemed that he was in no position to say that.

But <Heartseed> was, in the end, only <Heartseed>.

This world was only this world.

As long as his will was strong enough, there was no problem.

Chihiro felt slightly uneasy about his own strength.

But the five upperclassmen welcomed him and Enjouji, all smiles.

At about this time, the two of them had finally become members of the Cultural Research Club.

“But... I feel really bad for not being punished at all.”

Hearing Chihiro murmur this, Inaba said:

“Oh? Chihiro, you want to be punished because you’d feel better that way?”

“Uh, um... yeah.”

Chihiro peeked at Inaba’s sadistic grin and couldn’t help but take a step back, but he’d agreed to it himself and couldn’t escape now.

“You’re right. The important things are over, said and done with... However!”

Thump. — Inaba bopped the table.

“Just like I said before, I forgive you for using [Fantasy Projection] on us. It’s just that... for a certain incident that happened during that time, we’ll be settling that score very slowly from now on, understand, Chihirooooo?!”

“Eep!... U-Understood!”

“Firstly... How dare you make me take my clothes off and take a bunch of pictures! How dare you trample on a girl’s pure feelings! I want a performance fee!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

Chihiro bowed to Inaba in apology.

“Hey, Chihiro! What’d you do to my girlfriend?! Wait... performance fee? That’s like saying, as long as you get cash, it’s fine if he takes pictures?”

“I remember you hitting me!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

With extreme guilt, Chihiro apologized to Taichi and Aoki.

“Chihhi-san, I remember my poor girl’s heart being hurt very badly by you toooo.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Chihiro apologized to Nagase, with his head bowed as far as it could go.

“O-On that rainy day, you overheard me saying a bunch of awkward stuff! I can’t get married now! You have to take responsibility!”

“I’m really, really sorry!”

Chihiro bumped his head on the table, bowing to Yui in apology.

“It’s all my fault, I’m sorry everyone! I’ll do anything, really!”

“... You’ll do anything? Then please do my punishment first.”

Inaba’s eyes flashed sharply.

She’s got blackmail on me? No, this is good — Chihiro convinced himself.

Okay, bring it.

“Your mission... do all you can to participate in the athletics festival, and bring the green team to victory! If we don’t win, prepare to shave your head!”

... He wasn’t in the sports club, so making him shave his head was taking it a little too far!

Chapter 8: The Day of the Athletics Festival

Month: O

Day: X

Clear

Something really shocking has happened.

And a ton of stuff has been going on.

In the midst of these things, I think I've actually become the protagonist.

It was a really troublesome problem this time, so it would be kind of reckless to call myself that, but to me, this seems like a very important, essential incident... though I never want to experience it again.

Have I changed?

I've definitely changed.

I'm definitely in control of the moment now.

Whether I make this moment into reality or not, it all depends on my own actions.

Starting now, starting now!

From this point on, our... our war has begun!

In any case, good luck tomorrow, Chihiro-kun!

I love the Cultural Research Club.

+++

The class began discussing the guidelines of the athletics festival's cheer competition.

The meeting ended with a simple discussion, and the reps standing at the front returned to their seats.

Only Chihiro remained at the podium.

He was going to fulfill his commitment, or rather, the moment itself.

A few students watched him with “What’s up?” expressions.

“Uwa? Did you forget to say something?”

Tada asked casually, but Chihiro couldn’t find the strength to reply.

A storm of unease was swirling inside him.

The class’s mood wasn’t exactly agreeable, since their discussion just now had been anything but lively. Students who sat close to each other were absorbed in their own conversations, and the entire class lacked any sense of unity.

In this type of unassisted situation, he had to fight like a man.

Someone Chihiro hadn’t noticed at all realized that he had remained in the front of the classroom, and fixed his gaze on him.

What Chihiro planned to do would probably chill the mood. No, rather, it was supposed to be quite a fervent matter, but since it was *too* passionate, it would utterly freeze the mood.

Chihiro didn’t know if his actions this time would end in success or failure. Frankly, he felt that he was more likely to fail.

If he failed, the aftermath would be pretty disastrous. Not only would he be outed as a weirdo by his classmates, his place in the class would change.

But that was the worst that could happen.

Compared to the extremely wretched situation he had experienced before, most things were nothing; he could still crawl back up. The world was going to maintain its original form anyway, so only his surroundings would change slightly. He wouldn’t die.

So, he would try to change the world.

“Let’s do our best at the athletics festival, let’s give it our all!”

Chihiro's voice resounded throughout the silent classroom.

After saying it, even Chihiro himself felt cold. Once it left his mouth he realized that it sounded way more embarrassing than he had imagined.

He was at a loss for what kind of person could speak naturally like this.

"Hey, hey, Uwa..."

"T-Think about it, everyone, in the end, we want to attend the athletics festival, don't we? Whether we want to attend casually or seriously, we want to go all the same. So, even if we do our best... or be a little bit serious, it won't matter, will it? Besides, if we win at the athletics festival, it'll benefit us a lot at the Cultural Festival... L-Let's work together!"

Chihiro stopped here — but no one expressed any sort of opinion whatsoever.

He could sympathize; after all, it was very difficult to be the first to share an opinion in this type of situation. The first person wouldn't have a precedent to rely on, so he wouldn't know whether he had the correct answer or not. The so-called "trend" was very important, so in order to live smoothly and safely in this world, one must properly watch the development of such a trend.

But if he only went with trends and wherever the wind blew, he wouldn't be able to change anything, and nothing would happen.

Even if he bluffed or put forth false bravado, as long as one single person acted— Come to think of it... had he scared everyone into keeping silent? If that were the case, this was too pathetic for Chihiro, so pathetic that his stomach hurt.

"T-This sounds like a youthful idea, it sounds great! I agree!"

Enjouji suddenly stood from her seat and spoke up.

Chihiro had agreed with Enjouji beforehand that she would come to his rescue if anything happened. As long as one person started, the others would follow easily. He felt that the word "youthful" was a bit immature, but it was still acceptable, wasn't it?

Nice going, Enjouji.

Together, Chihiro at the podium and Enjouji standing in the middle of the classroom lifted the revolutionary beacon. Even if only two people were standing up now; in another sense, there were *already* two people standing up.

Even if there was only one, there had to be someone else, absolutely must be someone else, not much longer before someone else... They looked fearful, but there would *definitely* be someone else who followed this trend...

Not a single person stood up.

Only Chihiro and Enjouji stood alone in the blizzard-torn classroom.

“Damn, if someone like you... a guy who isn’t necessarily dark, but wouldn’t usually lead the charge, suddenly comes up and talks like that... you’d scare everyone!”

Tada, who sat in front of him, told him during break.

“Shut up! I know! I know, dammit!”

Since he had just broken through that kind of supernatural phenomenon and had been exposed to the Cultural Research Club’s “passion” for some time, Chihiro had already gotten used to being unusual and had forgotten what it meant to be normal. Suddenly displaying that sort of passionate attitude without warning would naturally scare his classmates. When Taichi and the others were in their classes, they’d probably cooperate with the class’s mood.

“Chi-Chihiro-kun... you failed.”

Enjouji said gloomily.

“At this rate, you’ll be doomed to baldness, Chihiro-kun... I’ll always remember your hair...”

“Don’t just decide my baldness on your own! And it’s not baldness, it’s shaving my hair off. Also, even if you forget about my hair, it’ll grow back... There’s too much to criticize with you anyway!”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Were you guys doing a skit or something?”

Tada asked, causing some guys nearby to roar with laughter. After all, what

Chihiro just did seemed to have attracted everyone's attention a bit.

Ahh, but... Dammit, he'd tried pretty hard already, but it had no effect whatsoever. To be honest, he was a little discouraged... But he wouldn't give up. It was time to find another way.

"Enjouji-san, do you plan to go hard in the athletics festival? Or were you just seconding Uwa-kun's motion?"

A girl named Higashino, who sat beside her, asked in an almost mocking tone, since she was interested in the topic of romantic relationships and wanted to join in on the fun.

"I-I want to try my best! Because it's more fun to do it seriously, and we'll be happier... And also... I feel that... it's cooler that way..."

It's more fun to do it seriously, we'll be happier, and it's cooler that way — it certainly seemed like Enjouji's style of speech.

"Cooler, eh? Guys who work out are pretty cool~, and if we're active in the games, we'll be taking on a whole new level of respect! In other words, you're excited for Uwa-kun to showcase himself during the Festival."

"G-Guys? Chihiro-kun? Uh, um... I don't think that's quite it... In any case, it'd be such a pity for a guy to become bald at such a young age..."

Why was her conversation based on the premise of becoming bald?

"Huh? Do you like admiring guys who participate seriously in the athletics festival, Enjouji-san?" Tada asked.

"Huh... Huuhh? Um, yeah. I think... that would be great."

"Great, hm... I see."

Enjouji's idea of "great" seemed to be different from Tada's.

No, that didn't matter. Anyway, he had to think of a way to increase class morale, since it involved his own potential baldness after all... No, it involved shaving his head... Huh? W-Wait.

"Hey, can I ask you all something? What do you think of guys who participate seriously in the athletics festival, or guys who work out a lot?"

Chihiro enquired the group that Higashino, who had just asked Enjouji the same question, was part of.

“Hm? You mean, ‘I’m going to participate seriously, so what do you think of me’? You hitting on us?”

“That’s not what I mean, I wanted to ask you all what you think of guys like those.”

Chihiro had the impression that Higashino was a very open girl, and as a boy himself, he’d find conversation easy with her.

“I think they’re great~. There wouldn’t be any girls who hate fit guys, would there?”

“Serious guys are great~. Ah, but they can’t be too passionate!”

“Like, guys who play high school baseball are so cool, and inspiring, too!”

“I get it, I get it, the image of them sweating furiously is really...”

“Huh? You like the smell of sweat?”

“No!”

The girls chatted animatedly, their chitchat becoming quite enthusiastic.

“So? You got a problem with that?” Higashino demanded.

“Hey... Could I ask you to keep this topic popular among the girls for a while?”

Although a wall existed between the boys and the girls of Class 1-B, creating a lack of intimacy, the class actually wasn’t that bad together. Thus, the topic of “guys who work out a lot are very cool” began flowing amongst the girls at lightning speed.

And so—

“Hey, Uwa, I’ll attend the athletics festival seriously, leave it to me.”

“Same.”

“Same.”

“Same.”

Most of the guys in Class 1-B were pretty practical.

“Good, excellent... This’ll massively increase the guys’ drive!”

Although he was still slightly uneasy, he couldn’t hope for everything, and besides, he’d achieved his ideal trend of one person taking action and the others following suit. Next, if this sort of mood permeated the girls too, that would be even better.

“Uwa.”

Tada called Chihiro.

“You’re amazing, the guys are even talking about practicing their events.”

“Ahh, I heard that too. Since we don’t have a lot of time, we’re trying not to put too much emphasis on points from the cheer competition and instead rely on event points, right? Also, I’m not that amazing.”

The practical guys planned on using a practical method to win.

“Why’re you so serious all of a sudden?”

“Because Inaba-senpai—”

Chihiro stopped mid-sentence and thought. Did he want to seriously participate in the Athletics Festival because Inaba had ordered him to?

If Inaba hadn’t ordered him to, what would he have done?

It’s more fun to do it seriously, we’ll be happier, and it’s cooler that way.

“... Because I want to.”

“Because Enjouji-san said so?”

“Nah, my relationship with Enjouji isn’t what you guys think.”

“Ahh, I see.” Tada chuckled. “Hey, the guys’ fires have been lit, so now you’re worrying about how to ignite the girls’ competitiveness, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I think they just need a final push. Since they’ve already been affected by the guys, they’re thinking that they need to do something as well.”

“But, how should I push them...”

Chihiro said. With a “Leave it to me”, Tada gave him a thumbs-up.

Then, he said a little loudly:

“Ah~, if the guys train now, we’ll be rising on the scoreboard! If we don’t win *then*, it’ll have to be the girls’ fault... Oops.”

Tada theatrically pressed a hand to his mouth, then whispered to Chihiro: “When the guys and girls are separated, each will be real competitive towards the other, so this method is very effective! Heh, heh, heh!”

It did seem to have been very effective; the girls nearby were visibly affected by his words. Ah, the girls over there were affected too. Guys with girlfriends were different after all; he and Tada were like night and day.

“You’re a true expert, Tada... But it’s really surprising that you’re actually doing something for the Festival.”

“More like, you’re the surprise, Uwa. You’re pretty amazing after all. Thanks to you, everyone’s going to seriously give it a go now, including myself. Besides, doing something seriously is pretty embarrassing, isn’t it?”

“... Why is it thanks to me?”

Probably because he had spoken so passionately in front of everyone, right?

Chihiro thought as he asked.

It was his own brave actions, after all, that had changed this class— “Because there’s no way I’ll be more embarrassed than you, and that makes me rest way easier.”

Chihiro slumped onto his desk, clutching his head.

This world didn’t go his way at all, he clearly intended to have done it more elegantly.

But to the current Chihiro, this was his fighting style.

... How he hated this fighting style.

Chihiro was a bit worried about the newly recovered Yui and Taichi, so he sneaked off to peek into Class 2-B.

“Iori!”

“Whooaa! The impact of you running and hugging me is pretty intense, Yui.”

“Stick closer to each other, why don’t you? Not long ago, you two were keeping your distance...”

“But it’s because we were keeping our distance back then! I have a severe deficiency of Iori-content now! Even if it’s you, Yukina, I won’t hold back if you try to stop me!”

“Absorb as much as you want! By the way... are you jealous, Yukina?”

“No, I’m not *jealous*.”

“Heh heh, you’re at it again, why hide your own true feeeeelings?”

“Don’t turn me into some kind of weird character, okay? You’ve been quite scary lately, Fujishima-san!”

Yui appeared to be romping about quite cheerfully with the girls; there didn’t seem to be any problems.

Chihiro looked towards Taichi next.

“Hey, even though I chose to let the people with good motor skills go first while I was deciding the events we’re gonna do... You don’t want to do any event? Or do you have an event you’re good at?”

Taichi was talking to a quiet-looking boy.

“Huh? Ahh, I don’t have an event I really want to attend, but...”

“But?”

“When I was in the cavalry fights during elementary and middle school, I was always the rider... and I’ve never lost.”

“Hm! That’s really good, isn’t it? You should do cavalry fighting! Can you still change your event?”

“All right... if we can still change.”

“Good, then I’ll confirm with Watase.”

“Heh heh, we’ve discovered Oshima-kun’s talent in an unexpected way! Heh!”

An unusually excited twin-tailed girl piped up from the side.

“By the way, your method of discovering talent is brilliant, Yaegashi-kun. Why are you suddenly asking that type of stuff? Tell Nakayama-neesan~ about it.”

“Ahh... because one of my kouhais from the Cultural Research Club said some things that made me think a lot.”

“Really, really? What did you think about?”

“Um, how should I put it, it’s very hard to describe... I think, I’ve realized that some people actually have things they want to do but can’t without seizing the opportunity... I think that’s roughly it? I was like that before, too.”

“Oh... I see, Yaegashi Taichi... You’re quite the expert.”

“I wanted to ask just now, how exactly do you see me, Nakayama?”

These people are really amazing after all, Chihiro thought.

It seemed that he still needed some time before he could catch up to them.



The day of the athletics festival was a beautiful, sunny day.

Even though everyone was clamoring over how much more comfortable cloudier weather would be, after the festival was underway, their collective passion drove the heat as far away as possible.

According to the older students, this year seemed livelier than previous ones.

After lunch break, the cheer competition had concluded, and the athletics festival entered its final stages.

“You’ve been doing great, Chihiro.”

Inaba rustled Chihiro's hair.

There was only one event left, and judging by the point count, the two teams with hopes of winning were the Green Team, to which Inaba, Aoki, Chihiro, and Enjouji belonged, and the Red Team, to which Taichi, Iori, and Yui belonged. The Red Team was currently ahead and the Green Team behind, but both of their point counts were close, and if the Green Team placed higher than the Red Team in the final match they could turn the tables and win.

"This is going too well. It's inevitable because of us, isn't it? It's more interesting to think of it that way. In any case, everything depends on the results of the next match, including our own bet. It's pretty exciting."

"Yup."

"Of course, your shaved head depends on this too!"

She still remembers...?

"Although I won't be participating, good luck to you, Chihiro."

The final competition was the staple of Yamaboshi High School's athletics festival, an all-grade mixed cavalry fight.

Yamaboshi High School's cavalry fights involved the boys and girls forming small groups amongst themselves to fight a mixed battle.

Of course, no direct conflict was allowed between the boys and girls; one of the game's rules was that the female groups could attack both boys and girls, but the male groups could not attack the girls. If one only paid attention to this rule, it would appear that the girls could single-sidedly attack the boys, but typically, because of differences in physique, the girls' attacks wouldn't be able to reach them. Therefore, although it was basically "mixed", the boys and girls typically fought separately, though a girl would occasionally seize an opportunity to snatch away a boy's bandanna, which got the mood roaring — that was roughly how it was. Incidentally, people would sometimes take advantage of the fact that male groups couldn't attack female groups, using the girls to stop the enemy boys from advancing or carrying out similarly advanced battle tactics.

After two preliminaries, the final was to be between the victorious Red Team and Green Team.

The preliminaries were timed, but the final wasn't: both sides would engage in an all-out war until one side was completely destroyed. If one team was left with only boys and the other was left with only girls, the battle would reach a stalemate and victory would be decided by how many remaining groups each side had.

The fiery mood in the school was approaching its climax.

Whether it was the students' families coming to visit or the teams whose battles had already ended, all gazed unswervingly at this final, decisive battle.

Under the boiling sun, Chihiro listened to everyone's support from atop his "horse".

"Do your beeeeeeeest!"

"Don't loooooooooose!"

"Chaaaarrge!"

"Wipe the floor with 'em!"

Some seemed to be overly excited, and combative words were mixed into their shouts.

"You gotta win, Uwaaaaaaaaa!"

A hoarse call of support for Chihiro, too.

"You have to shave your head if you lose, Chihirooooo!"

... and a threat.

"Go for it, Chihiro-kun!"

Among the hubbub, Enjouji's voice reached Chihiro's ears too.

Chihiro was slightly surprised. That Enjouji, always the soft one, could shout so loudly.

"Begin!"

The battle kicked off.

“All right, let’s do this, Uwa!”

Tada, as his “horse” and in charge of direction, yelled from beneath Chihiro. Chihiro’s group began to move.

The Green Team he belonged to had many bulky guys, and they had used that kind of strength during the preliminaries to break through the other side with brute force.

Compared to them, the Red Team didn’t depend on that kind of power to win.

However, the Red Team possessed an honest-looking second year who seemed to be unusually lucky during the matches and was a galloping, invincible “Martial Goddess” on the battlefield — Kiriya Yui.

Yui didn’t just attack girls, but boys too, just like a sprinting, ferocious tiger on the battlefield.

The Red Team seemed to acknowledge Yui’s fighting ability: Yui’s “horses” were all taller girls. Even so, they still shouldn’t be able to reach the male riders using normal battle tactics, but Yui would stand on three female “horses” and attack when she fought. It was a highly difficult skill that could not be replicated by normal people.

If the boys could also fight the opposite sex they might have been able to match that, but the boys couldn’t attack Yui, and the girls were no match for her.

Having overcome her disadvantageous height, Yui was singlehandedly wiping the floor with everyone.

“Anyway, girls, first lure away Yui-sa... lure away that long-haired girl’s group, and buy us some time! We’ll smash the guys first!”

Chihiro commanded loudly.

The Strongly United Team versus the Few But Elite Team. Both sides were evenly matched.

A fantastic, chaotic battle unfolded between them.

Sand flew.

Cheers erupted.

The cavalry groups of both sides fell in battle, one by one, onto the sand.

A second year boy, second only to Yui as an elite, began facing off with Chihiro. Yui's activity had far outshined this boy's, but he had seized a massive number of bandannas on his own.

"GO!"

Chihiro struck first.

The boy responded to Chihiro and took action, but Chihiro focused on this moment and threw out his arm. It had been a feint.

"Eat this!"

Chihiro snatched the boy's bandanna.

"Incredible, Uwa!"

"Don't look at me now, I've practiced karate for a long time!"

By the time he realized it, there were no more groups around him.

The only ones left on the battlefield were a group of girls on his team and the enemy group with Yui.

Live commentary from the Broadcasting Club broke out on the loudspeakers.

"The only one currently left on the battlefield is the very, very, very active Kiriyaama Yui-san of the Red Team, who has become a female hero in one fell swoop! Where was she in her first year?! In addition, the Green Team still has one group of guys and one group of girls. Therefore, after we organize the situation... Please explain for us, commentator-san."

"The instant Kiriyaama-san loses, the Green Team will win; on the other hand, if the girls of the Green Team are eliminated first, there will only be a guy versus a girl left on the battlefield, and the match will be declared over. Since there will be an equal number of groups, the cavalry fight will be a draw, and the Red Team will win. If the Green Team's guys are eliminated first, it will be a girl versus a girl, and the match will continue, but... if it becomes a one-on-one, there is not a shred of doubt that Kiriyaama-san of the Red Team will win. Even if

it's two-on-one now, the guys can't attack the girls, so this can be called a one-on-one. In other words, victory has already been—"

"Okay, thank you for that very professional commentary! Incidentally, although that last comment was not wrong, it would kill the mood, so there's no need to be so thorough! In any case, the first team to suffer an elimination will lose! Just remember that, everyone! In other words, this is truly the final, decisive battle, it's so awesooooome!"

They had gotten a small glimpse of the method that the event organizers had used to keep the mood sizzling.

Everyone listened intently to the commentary, and the never-ending fierce fighting stopped for a moment.

A moment of silence loomed on the battlefield.

Yui's group was positioned directly in the center, sandwiched between Chihiro and the girls allied with him.

Chihiro and the girls allied with him signaled to each other with a glance, then slowly closed in on Yui. The sandwich maneuver didn't really have any meaning because Chihiro couldn't attack Yui; it was really a duel between the two girls, and the results of that were already predictable.

So it was just as the commentator had said: victory had already been decided. It wasn't an exaggeration.

But—

If they thought of victory as an absolute goal, and thought backwards from their goal, they still had a chance.

Interesting, how interesting.

Even in this sort of situation, they could still find a way to turn the tables as long as they did not give up hope, so this world was really too interesting.

Next, he would only need to take action and turn the false victory in his mind into reality.

The distance between both sides slowly decreased.

They were about to enter the into range of battle.

Just then, Yui stood up from her seated position on her “horses”. Both of her feet stepped onto the shoulders of two “horses”, and she nimbly maintained her balance. She stood extremely tall; it looked like she was practically cheating.

Yui’s chestnut hair billowed in the wind, and she fixated her stare on the enemy she was about to pounce on.

“So we’ll win if we just defeat that girl? Don’t mind if I do, then. Chihiro-kun can’t attack me anyway—”

“Hey, Yui-san.”

In order to win, Chihiro spoke to Yui.

“Yeah, what?”

“Yui-san, you’re not trying to... make the cavalry fight a draw, and have the Red Team win like that? If you defeat our girl first, that’s what’s going to happen.”

Chihiro incited the unyielding Yui.

“What?! H-How could I do that?! Even if it’s just a cavalry fight, we’ll be earning an all-out victory, a perfect victory!”

“W-Wait, Yui, you don’t need to mind such an obvious provocation from them!”

She fell for it.

“The guys can’t attack us anyway, so it won’t matter if we attack them first! All right, let’s go!”

“I-I got it.”

Yui’s group sprinted at Chihiro’s group, their speed blinding. The girls who served as Yui’s “horses” had to be masters of strength.

“What do we do? Uwa! Do we run for it?”

“No need, keep it like this.”

Chihiro observed Yui’s movements; their allied girl tried to draw near Yui but

there was still a distance between them.

“You’re telling me to keep it like this... But we can’t attack, so if they catch us the game will end!”

End.

Indeed, it was about to end.

Let’s end this dragged-out story here.

It was something he had never been willing to accept until now, like an illusion.

In this moment, make that thing real, and end it.

This end will become the beginning for next time.

“Yui-san, I used to seriously like you.”

Yui’s competitive eyes widened in shock.

Yui’s bud-like lips parted in surprise.

Then, in the next instant — her face turned a deep red.

“Huh? Huh? W-What did you say, Chihiro-kun? S-Sincerely? Are you serious? Wait, hold on, um, Ch-Chihiro-kun, he... Y-Y-You’re kidding me! Wait, wait!”

Yui began to flail about. To stop her from falling, the “horses” could only stand still, trying to maintain balance.

“Yui, Yui! Concentrate, stop flailing around, stand still! Hey, listen to me! If you keep doing that—”

The girl allied with Chihiro seized the opportunity to snatch Yui’s bandanna.



Epilogue: Changing Someone's World

“What do you mean? What do you mean? *What do you mean?!*”

Yui demanded of Chihiro in a spitting rage after the athletics festival.

“I said that I *used* to seriously like you, it’s past tense, it happened in the *past*. We’ve known each other for so long anyway, so it’s not weird for such a phase to have happened, is it?”

“Urgh... You actually told me that you’ve liked me before to distract me... But it wasn’t a lie...”

Yui clutched her head in distress and shook it fiercely, as if she were enduring a struggle within her heart.

“Urggh! I looost! How am I supposed to explain this to everyone?”

Actually, the phase in which he had liked her [before] was when he had met Yui, all the way to now.

Incidentally, since Yui was very active during the athletics festival, rumor was that nobody blamed her at all.

After their victory, Class 1-B seemed unable to calm down.

“Ahh, this is fantastic! This is utterly fantastic!”

“I’m so glad we trained seriously... You reap what you sow!”

“I think I’m actually moved~.”

“A lot of it came from the boys winning *botaoshi*!”

“No, that honor should go to the girls for winning the relay race! That event gave us a ton of points!” Everyone worked together for the group competition, and they had won. After this dramatic conclusion, the boys and girls in the class mixed together, intently discussing the athletics festival that day.

“But the most important part! Uwa-kun's part!”

The girl named Higashino shouted, pointing at Chihiro.

“You bet!”

“Good going, Uwa!”

“Yeah, Athletics Festival Leader!”

“Child of the Athletics Festival!”

“No, I didn’t do much... and what does ‘Child of the Athletics Festival’ mean? What kind of character are you guys turning me into?”

Chihiro’s sudden talk about working hard before the athletics festival had led his classmates to believe he held some sort of special sentiment towards it.

“Let’s just call Uwa-kun ‘Athletics Festival’ from now on!”

“Don’t just make decisions on your own! At least call me something that fits me...”

“Give me an example, what kind of characteristic can we use as your nickname, Uwa-kun?”

“... For example... I think I was unusually passionate...”

“Ah, so Uwa-kun wants to become *that* kind of person? Heh! Didn’t expect that.”

“Uwa, I’m very sorry to inform you, but there’s something called staying within your boundaries...”

“Don’t advise me all seriously like that! It’s my freedom to admire whatever I want! N-No, I don’t admire anyone in that way!”

“Chihiro-kun’s a *tsundere*. Like, 80% *tsun*, and 20% *dere*.”

“Shut it, Enjouji. When did you become so familiar with the meaning of *tsundere* that you can even give examples?”

Afterwards, the members of Class 1-B held a bowling tournament as the celebratory banquet of the athletics festival.

The next morning, the breakfast table was stacked with a simple salad and toast. Chihiro, his father, and his younger brother sat at the table; his mother was in the kitchen preparing bentos for both boys.

Chihiro spread butter on his toast and bit into it.

The three of them didn't talk.

His father sipped his coffee and read the newspaper. He didn't know whether something good had happened to his brother or if he had become obsessed with some song; he would occasionally hum while he ate.

Only the sound of the television echoed empty.

His father stood, leaving the table to brush up his appearance.

His brother's untouched tomatoes sat on his plate. His mother knew that he wouldn't eat them, but kept adding them into his brother's salad anyway.

It was a typical morning that had already repeated itself several times, tens of times, hundreds of times.

Today, Chihiro was determined to try and change this morning a little bit.

"Are you humming Yuratei's new song?"

"Huh? You know that band, bro? So you listen to this kind of niche music too. Their new song is great, by the way! But I'm broke right now! I can't buy their CD~. I don't know how many times I've listened to the MV on their official website..."

"I have the CD, want to borrow it?"

"Eh... You have the CD? When did you become interested in this type of music, bro? I've always thought that you'd pay attention to that! Lend it to me! Lend it to me!"

"Sure, but you need to finish your tomatoes first."

"Huh... tomatoes? Hey, what's with that condition! Why... I-I got it! I'll eat it! I'll eat it, okay?!"

His brother threw all of the tomatoes into his mouth and began to chew.

"Ugu... Oof... Mm, finished! Lend it to me right after school today!"

With that, his brother dashed towards the bathroom.

His plate was clean, leaving nothing behind.

“Thank you, Chihiro.” His mother said.

Only the noise of the television echoed emptily — Chihiro had always thought this, but if he listened carefully, he would discover that the morning of the Uwa household still resonated with the warm, gentle sounds of his mother preparing food.

As long as he tried to change, the world would immediately change.

As long as he changed his perspective on things, the world would immediately change with it.

The world will always maintain its original form, his own world within it, and he could rely on himself to change.

After finishing his preparations, Chihiro left home.

It was the first school day after the athletics festival. What exactly would the class’s mood be like? If the mood back then had only been temporary overexcitement, the class would regain its original mood today, and what should he do then? No, that would be quite interesting too.

What would he want to do then?

He already knew that his classmates could be serious when the circumstances called for it, so could he maintain the current situation? Ahh, indeed, that would work. It would be a real headache to be that passionate all year; it didn’t fit his personality at all.

The best case scenario would be if they become passionate only during events... Chihiro thought so, but things would certainly not go as well as he hoped.

There was no way he could create a world that went as he hoped.

Because everyone had their own ideal world.

Everyone’s ideals were different: they would interfere with each other, conflict with each other, and finally combine, into a massive world.

Then, how should he view that world — *this* world?

Chihiro looked up into the sky.

The blue sky unfolded as far as the eye could see.

Every time he saw this sky, he would remember.

—Remember how those people had changed his world.

+++

Could he change someone's world? — thought Yaegashi Taichi.

After the end of the phenomenon, <Heartseed> making everyone see imposters and selecting Chihiro to become the inciter, Chihiro and Enjouji came to thank Taichi, saying "It's thanks to you senpais that you could change our world".

Changing someone's world was no easy task, and it wasn't a task one could do just by "doing" it, but during <Heartseed>'s phenomenon, Chihiro and the others certainly seemed that way. During this time, had he done anything himself?

When this time had first begun, Taichi didn't even notice that the phenomenon had started. Although Chihiro had claimed "I didn't think I could win," he was being much too modest, and the actual situation was a lot more dangerous.

Imposters began to appear. What a frightening world.

He didn't know what would become of it if they had missed even one piece of the puzzle. He seemed to lose his memories in the middle of everything; just how much had Inaba and the others worried about him?

But everyone worked together to overcome this crisis.

<Heartseed>'s new method was no longer random this time. However, even if Chihiro were consciously instigating incidents, to Taichi, it was no different from being random. In this sense alone, it could be said that he had definitely acted

according to certain rules.

But did <Heartseed>'s change of method hold some sort of important meaning?

Did this mean that a new stage was going to begin?

Or did it signify that it was going to end soon?

No matter what, they had successfully protected their world this time. For now, just this was enough.

In addition, Chihiro and Enjouji had finally, in the truest sense, become members of the Cultural Research Club.

They had overcome the hurdle that is <Heartseed>, and were willing to stay in the club. Taichi kept trying to convince them otherwise, but neither of them was swayed.

Because there were important things — both of them looked very strong and dependable while saying so.

Although Chihiro was still Chihiro, he felt much more open than he had been before.

Although Enjouji was still Enjouji, she felt much more assertive than she had been before.

Even though they hadn't changed much superficially, both had changed in many ways. If they had changed for the better, and if he had helped with that, then that was excellent.

How had he — How had he and the others changed those two?

In the end, Taichi still couldn't figure it out.

Taichi could only say one thing.

As long as he treasured every day and lived with all his might, maybe he could occasionally change someone's world — just that.

Taichi and Yui didn't lose their memories.

She was so, so, so so so so glad.

If their memories had been lost, if their memories of everyone had been lost... Damn, she didn't even want to think about it.

She didn't know how many nights she had tossed and turned over this, but luckily she'd scraped by just before having a meltdown. Before her glasslike theatrics of feigned strength could shatter, they had regained their memories, and no one needed to worry about her.

She fervently believed that it was everything she had.

It was everything, and *it* was her.

But luckily, after this incident, she couldn't help but think about *that* kind of future.

She was downright unable to imagine, and did not want to imagine, that kind of world. But that world might loom one day. Then, she would— She was at a complete loss for what to expect. She was scared. She was terrified. She could only fear it, fear it more than anything.

If Yaegashi Taichi were to disappear, what would she become?

She — Inaba Himeko, tried to imagine such a future, and began to tremble all alone.

Kokoro Connect: Nise Random - End

Afterword

To all readers who have picked up this book, I am sincerely grateful.

[Nise Random] is the sixth book in the [Kokoro Connect] series, following Volume 1, [Hito Random], Volume 2, [Kizu Random], Volume 3, [Kako Random], Volume 4, [Michi Random], and the short story collection, [Clip Time].

“As long as we try a little harder, ‘*Kokoroco*’ will become a widely used official abbreviation... we only need a final push!” I’m Sadanatsu Anda, who has always held this kind of small wish. Say it with me: ready~, *Kokoroco*!

By the way, perhaps some readers have already noticed, but I start every one of my afterwords by writing all of the this series’ titles in order.

This is because this book is clearly part of a series, but the book title doesn’t include a volume number, so in order to minimize confusion or a wrong purchase when readers buy it, I make it clear at the beginning of the afterword.

But, as someone would point out, “If that’s so, then you should have numbered them from the beginning.” Indeed, that hits me where it hurts.

We had thought before about adding the volume numbers if possible, honest.

However, all thoughts like those were completely rejected, and in the end, we couldn’t help but relent. That towering barrier we had no way of climbing over... Yes, indeed, those are the so-called — grown-up matters.

... Yeah, I just wanted an excuse to say the phrase “grown-up matters”.

Well, why did I bring this up? Those who already know might say “Hindsight is 20/20,” but I hope that you readers can take this opportunity to learn something.

When you encounter an item without volume numbers in a bookstore or some other place and become distressed, wondering “Which volume is this?”... Please see the back cover! If it’s a Famitsu published book, you will be able to tell which volume of the series it is just by looking at the back cover.

By way of example, this book should be marked “A 12 1-5” on the upper portion of the back cover. “A 12” is my authorial serial number, and “1-5” signifies that this book is the fifth volume of my first series.

As long as you glance at the back cover, you won’t be confused with the publishing order!

By the way, the short story collection [Clip Time] is labeled “A 12 2-1”. This is because the title of that volume changed a bit, so it was sorted as a second series.

This means that it’s impossible to tell which volume the short story collection comes after...

B-But, as long as you glance at the list of works in the dust jacket fold, you’ll be fine!

If the bookstore wraps it in film, then I apologize! I’m sorry (this is just in case, it’s not that particular bookstore’s fault).

Now, let’s talk about something else.

The second volume of the manga will release in December 2011!

The second radio drama CD, *Spring, Dates, and Sister Games* will release in January 2012!

And... an anime adaptation has been greenlit!

It really looks spectacular when I list all of this out in one go... Things seem to have been going pretty impressively lately...

This is all thanks to the support of the relevant staff, as well as you readers. I am truly grateful for everyone.

Whether it is the manga, the radio drama, or the anime, everything is indebted to the passionate efforts of the staff. The end product is shaping up to be quite exciting, I’m sure that it will fulfill all of your expectations! As the author, I will also do my utmost to aid production, so please stay tuned!

Additionally, I hope that everyone will please continue to support the [Kokoro Connect] series, its multimedia adaptations, and its various spinoffs.

I don't have much space left, so I will begin my acknowledgements here. Firstly, to the relevant staff members involved in the publication of this book, especially my wonderful executive editor, I am extremely grateful. No matter how many volumes I release, my gratitude will not change. Also, to Shiromizakana-sensei, I no longer know how to express my gratitude to you; in short, thank you so much, and please continue to support me.

Finally, to you readers who have been supporting this work since its first few volumes, and you who picked up this book, I express my sincerest gratitude.

September 2011 Sadanatsu Anda